ROBERT E. MILLS

STAR FIGHTERS

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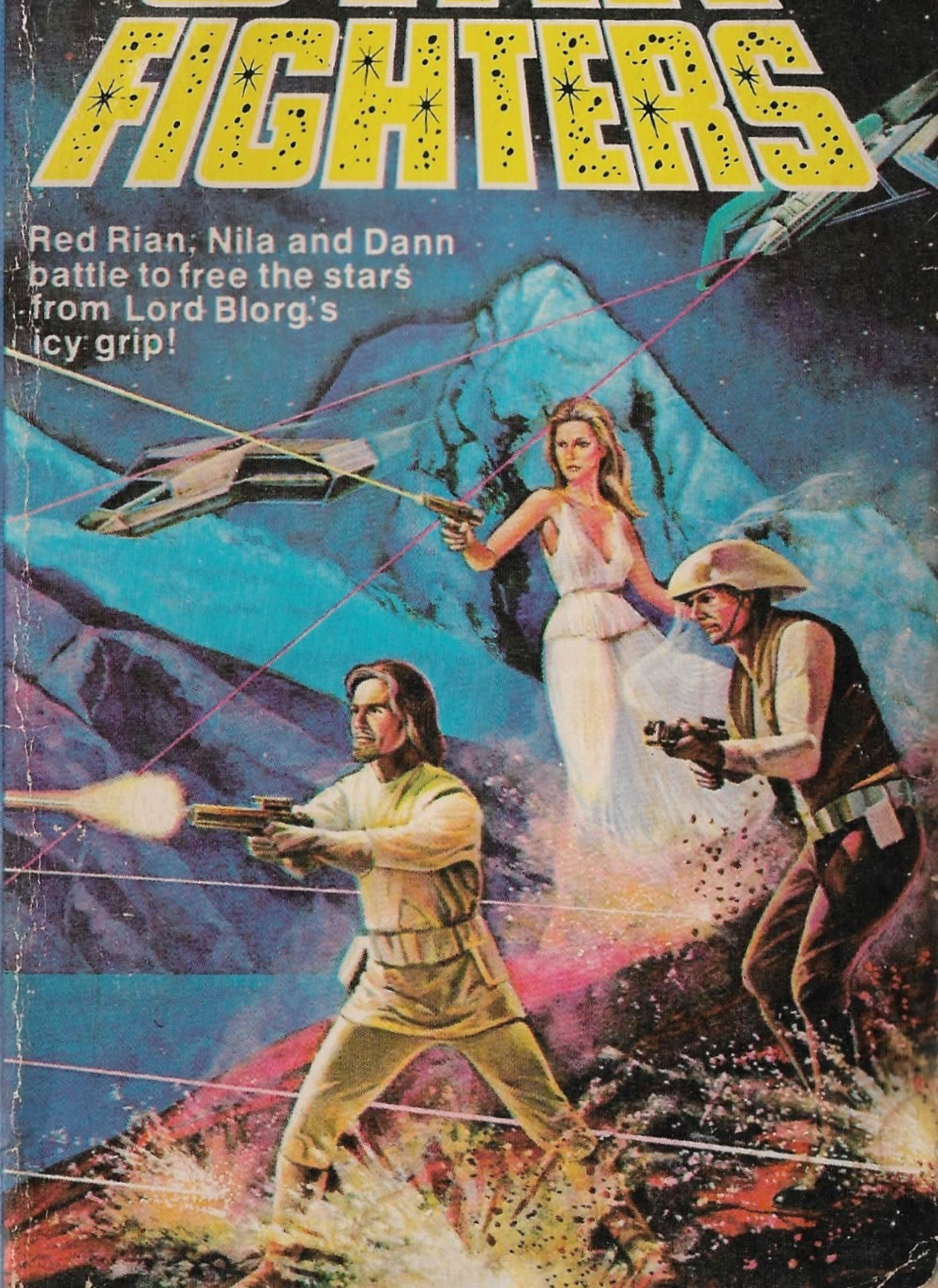
Red Rian, Nila and Dann battle to free the stars from Lord Blorg's icy grip!



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It had been an eternity since the Dark Emperor had such interesting rivals as Red Rian, Lady Nila, Dann Oryzon, and Garthane's Fellowship of Light. But the powers of darkness and powers of light find that they aren't the only players in . . .

THE GREAT GALACTIC GAME

The Mordlings:

Out of the depths of the Planet Flaigon came the Dark Emperor's latest and most monstrous creation.

The Valsings:

Their way of life was war, their greatest pleasure, killing. And with the destruction of their home world in Havenel, the Dark Emperor made mortal enemies of these fierce and fearless people.

Who Were They?

Who were the mysterious creatures that held a strange power over the Dark Emperor? Would they be friends — or foes?

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STAR FIGHTERS

Robert E. Mills

BELMONT TOWER BOOKS ● NEW YORK CITY

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STAR FIGHTERS

A BELMONT TOWER BOOK

Published by

Tower Publications, Inc.
Two Park Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10016

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Prologue

It was a time of tragedy and alarm; it was a time of hope and wonder. A dark, encroaching evil was loose in the universe, a force that harnessed the creative powers of consciousness to the dark and terrible forces of nature, to the negative pole of the Infinite. It was a time when the powers of good and evil met in a combat of cosmic magnitude. It was the time when the Primula galaxy became a graveyard for the crews and starships of the Dark Empire's mighty armada.

Of all beings in the known universe, Ylang-Ylang, the Dark Empire's lord, was the most wondrous . . . and the most terrible. God-like and incorporeal, a self-created immortal whose basis appeared to be energy itself, it was a thing devoted entirely to the works of evil and the domination of all sentient creatures. The heart of its empire was the black planet Flaigon, home of its ancestors, the extinct Mordlings. The last survivor of this titanic race, Ylang had transformed itself into a deathless being, a great and fearsome mass of corrupt energies whose very sight was too much to be borne by the eyes and minds of mortal creatures.

Its heritage was the incredibly advanced science and refinements of evil developed by its ancestors, whose lifespans ran in excess of six thousand years. Its will-to-power was as limitless as its appetite for evil was

insatiable. Ylang fed upon the energies produced by the torment and agony of other sentient life-forms, literally consuming its victims in the process; hence its title, the Great Devourer.

The Chronicles of Tallin

The forces of the Dark Empire seemed to be irresistible: its black starfleets ranged far and wide, extinguishing the light of freedom in galaxy after galaxy, creating in this manner the mightiest empire ever known among the stars. Rebellions were virtually unheard-of in that vast slave-empire, for the reason that their occurrence brought forth punishments of unbelievable severity.

The elite fighting force of the empire was the Death Legion, commanded by yet another elite, the Ysss: a race of fierce reptiloids who held the empire's highest offices and kept the counsel of the Dark Emperor. They worshiped death and lived to destroy; friendship, kindness, pity and compassion they regarded as mere signs of weakness; they were creatures bred to murder. Chief among the Ysss overlords was Blorg, the Supreme Commander of all the empire forces and the being closest to Ylang-Ylang.

The Dark Empire spread across the star-fields in the manner of a tidal wave, and all who encountered it (with few exceptions) were convinced of its invincibility. It was a creation of darkness, a juggernaut fueled by evil and armored in the powers of the dark side of the Infinite. Its might grew with each new conquest; and horror and terror filled the shadows it left in its wake. The empire seemed truly unstoppable . . . until one day a strange combination of forces, both accidental and intentional, vectored-in on the line of its progress.

It started with the invasion of the Primula galaxy, a

place where war had been unknown for over two hundred years; and this act of naked aggression brought together most of the principal actors in this cosmic drama . . .

At this time, Dann Oryzon of the waterworld of Aquaea, a young man who never knew his real parents and one who had the rare honor of being adopted by the dolphin-civilization of the Quee, was taken prisoner aboard an empire startransport known as a slaver. There he was befriended by Callix of Aurea Solis (the golden planet that was the center of galactic resistance) and his daughter, the lady Nila, with whom Dann later fell in love. After an encounter with Lord Blorg, Callix (even though Dann had tried to save his life) died; but not before he pledged Dann to accompany his daughter and carry on his mission. That mission was to locate the Fellowship of Light, the mystical order that guarded the Primula galaxy in the days before the era of the Great Peace.

Dann and Nila were rescued by the first person to shatter the myth of the Dark Empire's invincibility: the star-pirate, Red Rian, a pilot of incredible skill and the skipper of the good ship Hazard, perhaps the best fighting ship to be found anywhere. With him were his first-mate, the "fierce and lovable" Purpur, a giant felinoid, and the young technical genius, Ween Leever. Rian and the rest of his crew were all from the neighboring galaxy of Taylos, natives of the planet Urgel, a world that had been destroyed by the Dark Empire in retaliation for its leadership of that galaxy's fierce resistance. Rian was a hard and blustering mercenary of a man who lived only to avenge the extinction of his family and people . . . a debt that could only be settled by the death of Lord Blorg.

Through the agency of the wise, beautiful and all-

too-human androids, Altektu and D-Anacom, the adventurers reached the planet Palos, in the outworlds of the Nova Vega system. This was the stronghold of the Fellowship of Light, and there Dann and Nila claimed the right of suppliants and asked for the aid of the galaxy's former guardians. Garthane, the imposing and serene High Master of the order (a man nearly three hundred years old!), invoked the power of the Infinite Oneness and pledged the Fellowship's aid, immediately recalling to Palos the scattered members of the now-depleted order.

Following this, Garthane sent Nila and Rian back to Aurea Solis, where she was to rally the League of Free Worlds and inform its chiefs of Garthane's strategy; the star-pirate and his crew would train the League's pilots and impart to its people their great fund of technical know-how and combat skills. Then, to the amazement of the others, the High Master told Dann Oryzon that he was to stay and be initiated into the Fellowship, an order that combined worldly and martial-arts skills with spiritual enlightenment. After the completion of the arduous and months-long initiation, consummated by an act of mass levitation caused by a "mind-lock," the result of the members' collective state of "At-One" with the Infinite, Garthane revelaed to Dann the fact that he was was his true father.

Nila brought the League Garthane's message, and Red Rian trained its pilots. Like Dann, the pirate changed much in the last days before the coming of the Dark Armada; and he, like the young Aquaean, fell in love with the lady from the golden planet. Nila herself had strong feelings for both men. But there was too little time for this complication to be resolved; the Dark Empire came first.

Through treachery, Blorg managed to recapture Nila.

He then took her to Ylang's lair in the subterranean Forbidden City of Kordor—along with the League's battle-plans. Displaying incredible audacity, Rian and his crew went after Blorg, and the star-pirate boldly confronted the horrible Ylang and challenged his favorite to mortal combat, the stakes being safe passage to Aurea Solis, should he be victorious. Mortal combat, foul-play and a series of remarkable events ensued, fascinating even the bored and immortal Ylang (for the eternal are prey to the constant threat of boredom). As a "reward" for their boldness, Ylang was about to consume his visitors, who were saved only by the arrival and intervention of Garthane and Dann. Ylang was distracted by an earthquake caused by the Fellowship's collective powers of mind, and Dann was able to lead his companions out of Kordor; Garthane did not come with them, and it was assumed that he had been killed by the Dark Emperor.

By the time the fugitives reached Aurea Solis, the dark armada had already attacked. Ordered by Rian to improvise when the battle-plans were discovered stolen, the League pilots fought bravely and well, inflicting great losses on their more rigid opponents; but the sheer numerical superiority of the enemy had begun to shift the balance. Rian, arriving in the Hazard, rallied the allies for a time; but they were soon overwhelmed again.

What saved the League was Garthane's arrival. Using the combined powers of mind of all its members, the Fellowship brought about the collapse and destruction of the greater part of the armada's starships; the survivors fled in panic. Meanwhile, Blorg had arrived as well, and was immediately embroiled in the combat when his flagship, the Devastator was confronted by the Hazard. After a hard battle in deep space, Rian had

the satisfaction of watching his adversary's fleeing starship erupt with a series of explosions that eventually consumed it.

The defeat of the armada freed the Primula galaxy . . . for the present. Now the future hangs in the balance, for the Dark Empire still casts its shadow over these star-fields; there are still worlds to be liberated and plans to be made. The struggle is not over yet . . . But, at the same time, the many suns of Primula seem to shine a little brighter; the laughter of children still rings in the air; and men and women still fall in love . . .

1 / No Longer Invincible

Cries of *Down with the Emperor*! and *On to Flaigon* echoed throughout all the free worlds of the Primula galaxy as soon as the news of the Dark Armada's destruction had been received. The enemy was no longer invincible, as the newly-composed popular song from Aurea Solis proclaimed; and Red Rian's words, "Catch 'em with their pants down—and boot 'em in the ass!" had become the slogan of the day. But there was no time for self-congratulation or resting on laurels; the occupied worlds of the galaxy still had to be liberated.

Tactically, the League of Free Worlds had one great advantage as "Operation Lib" commenced: the armada's destruction had left Primula relatively free of enemy starships. But the empire forces were entrenched on the ground, and there were still large numbers of atmospheric fighting-craft based on the occupied planets. On the day after the great victory, the liberation forces began to lift-off from their home bases, speeding to their assigned objectives, secure in the knowledge that they would be welcomed and assisted by the various resistance movements that had sprung up on many of the oppressed planets. And indeed, once the liberators had been sighted, there arose a wave of almost universal popular uprisings.

Savage and merciless, the Dark Empire garrisons had

made few friends; every civilian, young and old, male and female, was a potential (and often actual) enemy. Knives gleamed in the shadows; snipers ambushed officials; crowds swamped and overturned military vehicles; local techs sabotaged homie and recon-robots; and sentries mysteriously disappeared from their posts at night. The liberations weren't easy, but they came swiftly and inexorably nonetheless.

Dan Oryzon beamed at his father from the foot of the flexiladder and said, "Infinity is at the heart of all things." And Garthane, High Master of the Fellowship of Light, responded with the other half of the ritual formula, "All things are one." He waved and turned to enter the starship.

The day was bright with promise and Dann felt a young man's trust in the future and belief in the powers of change. What more could a young man ask? He had found his true father, been initiated into great mysteries, was instrumental in a glorious victory, and managed to survive and be reunited with his comrades-in-arms.

And who walked beside him, as he left the spaceport of Libera, capital of Aurea Solis, the golden world? Whose hair caught the sunlight and turned it to gold? Whose copper skin gave off the fragrance of summer flowers? Whose grey eyes reminded him of the cloud-mantled oceans of his homeworld with their beckoning depths?

Suddenly Dann stopped and turned to face the tall and graceful young woman beside him. "Nila," he said, no longer stammering in her presence the way he had months before, secure now in the knowledge of who he was and what he wanted. "Forgive me, but I have to ask this now. There's much to be done yet, and . . . well,

maybe we both won't be alive at the end of it all." He looked deep into her eyes. "Could you . . . ever . . . love me?"

Nila's smile was as beautiful as the sun that warmed her world. "I could," she replied, without a millisecond's hesitation. "And in a way, I already do." And she did, having been drawn to Dann from the first, after he attempted to save her father's life by confronting the horrible Blorg. The root of her feelings was composed of gratitude and respect; that root had grown into the stem of friendship and admiration; and the stem had begun to bear a flower . . .

"And Red Rian, too?" Dann asked, at the same time not wishing to hear her answer.

She and the star-pirate had been through much together, and beneath the armor he wore to defend his inner self, Nila had been able to see the beauty and goodness of the man. "Yes, Dann." She grew serious as she answered. "I have the same feelings toward both of you." She leaned over, brushed his cheek with her lips, and murmured softly in his ear. "That's why I can't make up my mind. I'm trying. Believe me, I am."

"Do you think you'll know . . . sometime soon?"

"As soon as I'm able, Dann."

"Fair enough," he said as they started walking again. "Let's get something to eat. I'm starved."

"Well," Nila replied, shaking her head. "At least I won't have to worry about you wasting away for love of me."

As she took his hand, he thought, *I'll know soon enough, I suppose. And tomorrow I'll be going home . . . to liberate Aquaea!*

"You knock-kneed, overfed, foot-dragging slag-farmers!" bawled the captain of the good ship Hazard.

You wobble-jointed, fork-toed sons of dung-skreets! You thimble-headed lot of Bedellian sissy-boys! Shape up or ship out! The next time we dock, you swag-bellied wimps, I'm going to scuttle you all, and sign up your grannies for the next cruise!"

Red Rian was in great form. The crew of the Hazard chortled and winked at each other behind their skipper's back. Even Purpur smiled, in his feline way. This tirade was just like old times. Blowing Blorg to reptiloid atoms had done wonders for the man. And even his chief tech-head, Ween Leever, a person known to prefer Rian in a quieter state—sleep, for instance, had to grin.

Rian grinned, too, as he brought the Hazard in from its post-combat shakedown flight. "The next man to snicker," he said cheerfully, "is going out through one of the tubes to be the first to land on Aurea Solis." He knew peace for the first time in many years, now that Blorg was gone and the blood-debt paid. His crew had outdone themselves as usual and the enemy had been smashed.

Only one thing perplexed him: How in the name of Zel do you destroy a thing as incredible and enormously powerful as Ylang-Ylang? That was a problem . . . Nevertheless, in a fit of optimism after the victory celebration, juiced to the neurons on nenegol (that dragon-slaying drink from his homeworld), Rian had tottered back to the Hazard's torpedo-bays, and painted each proton-torpedo with the name, Ylang-Ylang.

Who knows? he thought. *If we get lucky again, I might be able to chuck a few torpedos into the middle of that fat, churning mass of fission-fusion garbage. Now, wouldn't that be nice*?

He began to sing. "There was a girl from the outworlds . . ."

"Oh Zel, he's gonna sing!" a voice muttered over the ship's intercom. Groans went up throughout the Hazard.

"*And Ee-genn was her na-ame*," persisted Rian, fighting a smile that threatened to turn his features to jelly.

"This is worse than facing Ylang!" another crewman muttered. Unfortunately for his shipmates, Rian was more enthusiastic than than musical; his full-throated baritone was more than offset by a tin-ear.

Splat! Purpur, seated in the co-pilot's seat beside Rian, swished his thick tail and whacked his chief on the back of the head, registering his disapproval in the fashion of the cat-folk of Yahwoo. Cries of "*Let's mutiny*!" and "*Gag him*!" filled the ship. The muse beat a tactical retreat as Rian tugged his red beard and swallowed the next line of *The Girl from the Outworlds*.

"You win this time, you pusillanimous gleets," the pirate said. "But I won't forget this. And the next time one of you incompetents messes up, I won't just knock you on your launchpad—no, I'll lock you in my cabin and sing to you for half an hour. So watch your step, louts."

As the Hazard entered the atmosphere of the golden planet, Rian's thoughts turned to Nila. *She's got to crack soon. Dann's a good lad, of course, but she needs the support and experienced counsel of an older man. But she likes the kid, too . . . I don't know how she does it. I've lusted after dozens simultaneously, but only had the compartment space for one love at a time. Poor Nila, it must be a hard and wrenching thing for her, being divided by the love of two such worthy men. Well, a worthy man and a worthy boy. It's not easy. But whichever she chooses, at least she'll have the consola-*

tion of knowing she couldn't have possibly done better.

"Rian, you're too quiet," said Ween Leever.

"Ah, leave me to my thoughts, Weenie-boy," was his skipper's reply.

Old Klegg nudged Ween and whispered, "Can't you see the man's in love, lad?"

Ween's eyes went electro-shock wide. "I didn't know," he whispered back.

The old Taylian shook his head. "You would if you weren't always dreaming about gadgets and gizmos, boy. You must be the last person on the planet to know. Welcome to reality."

Purpur was happy for his chief. The cat-man leaned over and ran his sandpaper tongue up the nape of Red Rian's neck, and was amazed when he found the buccaneer too preoccupied to smack him in the chops.

As she combed her long hair in the focussing-mirror in her bedchamber, Nila visualized Dann Oryzon seated beside her. She thought they made a fine-looking couple. Dann had . . . *matured* . . . so much since the first time she laid eyes on him in the stall of the slaver. He had gone from boy to man in the few short months she'd known him, and Nila felt honored that the Infinite had permitted her to witness that great transformation, a normal part of the life-process, but something miraculous as well. It was as if she had watched the hand of a master-sculptor refining one of his creations.

After his initiation, Dann acquired a new sensitivity, a heightened awareness of life's richness and potential, and an increased respect for all its manifestations. Nila realized that this new-found maturity was the result of an almost simultaneous exposure to many forces. Dann's experience of the horrors of war and the inevitable mortal pains that attend separation and the death

and loss of loved ones had been balanced by life's positive gifts. He had gained friends and family in the crew of the Hazard, as well as comrades-in-arms; found his father, Garthane, who initiated him into the mysteries of life; been consoled and supported by the love and therapeutic expertise of those exquisite and self-refined entities, the androids Altektu and D-anacom; and had fallen in love, a state of existence that, requited or not, would also leave its mark on him forever.

Dann was brave and sweet, open to life . . . and not at all unattractive to Nila. She was drawn to him. But she was also drawn to Red Rian.

She stared into the mirror again and replaced Dann's features with those of the star-pirate. Where the young Aquaean's dark eyes and intense expression suggested great depths, places to be explored and experienced over a long period of time, the red-bearded buccaneer's glinting blue eyes and come-and-get-it smile beckoned her to a stormy and passionate voyage over the wilder seas of existence, promising stop-overs at the more colorful and exciting ports-of-call along the way.

Rian had dared to live intensely all his life; and he knew that his greatest enemy was not Blorg or Ylang, but himself. To him, life was a voyage of the soul, filled with challenge and adventure; and he would hold to his course where most men would tack to safety, determined to finish the journey in high style. Were Dann offered the prospect of stability, Rian held out the lure of adventure. Both men were as different as night and day; and both appealed to different sides of her nature. She owed it to them to come to a decision. And soon . . .

When Nila looked in the mirror once more, she was alone, although she could still feel the presence of both men at her side, balancing each other like equal weights

in the scale of her affections. She was grateful that the League's galactic business took precedence over the affairs of individuals at this time, and escaped into thoughts of the coming struggle.

The lady from the golden planet had done her work well: her liaison efforts had resulted in a total and well-organized network of cooperative exchange between the member-worlds of the League. Every tech-drome and starshipyard on every civilized planet was operating at full capacity; the prosperous galaxy was gearing all its manifold resources to meet the challenge of the Dark Empire. The stakes were high: nothing less than life and liberty; but the men and women of Primula gave their all and worked unremittingly for the common good.

Nothing like a good war to create a spirit of brotherhood, Nila thought, recalling the history she had studied at school. She noticed that her reflection wore a wry, sad smile. *Why does it always take a major catastrophe to get people to share things with each other? There must be easier ways to achieve the same result. I know there are . . .*

Then she thought of the horrible thing that called itself emperor of the Dark Empire, and shuddered. *Ylang's resources are enormous,* she granted. *But they're also deployed over numerous galaxies. We'll have a little time before the empire is ready to attack Primula again. And by that time, the occupied worlds will be long-liberated; we'll have build and equipped our fleets and made our plans. And Garthane will have made his . . .*

It seemed to Garthane that Primula's stars glittered more brightly than they had for a long time. Even the force of the Infinite seemed to hum in a more sublime

pitch, after lending its beneficent energies to those who respected it and drew their strength from the heart of its deep mysteries. The Fellowship renewed its ancient pledge to the peoples of the galaxy and, depleted as its membership was, had managed to unite its energies with the rhythms of the Infinite Oneness and subject the dark armada to an upheaval that wrenched apart the very molecules of its starships, tearing the black leviathan vessels to pieces in the living heart of the void.

And now the next step in Garthane's plan was being undertaken, as he and all the other members of the order set out on a journey among the worlds of Primula in search of those worthy to join the Fellowship. Ylang's power was almost beyond belief: Garthane knew that at first hand. But it was his gamble that, if enough men and women could be found, he would be able—always providing there were enough time and energy available—to augment the strength of the Fellowship, thereby dramatically increasing its collective powers of mind, the crucial factor in the struggle against the immortal Ylang and his legions.

Garthane's craggy features were composed in his characteristic expression of serenity, giving no indication of the feelings of urgency and anxiety that churned at some deep level of his being. But a person has many parts, and mind and spirit have many levels; Garthane was in tune with the source of life, and it fed his best energies and gave him the strength and determination to carry on the struggle . . . even though he knew that the odds against his side were incredibly high.

He knew what Ylang and his empire really represented: the dark side of the Infinite, the other side of our natures and minds—the dark, primitive forces that serve the powers of destruction and yearn always for a return to the dark vortex of chaos. And he also knew

that we must listen to the dark and instinctual powers that reside in ourselves as well as in the universe. The dark voices must be listened to and their message understood, for as light illuminates the darkness, so darkness defines the light. *To be dealt with*, Garthane thought, *Ylang's evil must be understood for what it is: the other side of our natures, the other side of the Infinite.*

He turned to stare at the man beside him, Brother Camenarpo, his second-in-command. Camenarpo's eyes were rolled up in their sockets and his hawk-features reflected the intensity of his trance-state. Garthane would miss his old companion when they parted company again; the High Master planned to rejoin his son on Aqauaea when the planet was liberated.

Despite the visions of war and horror that loomed on the horizon of his consciousness, Garthane felt warmed by his hopes and implicit trust in the powers of life. But he had his doubts; for if he was part eternal, he was only human as well . . .

Ylang-Ylang was not human at all, and was in a black mood as the slave-crews cleared the last of the rubble out of its lair. Earlier, on hearing of the armada's destruction, the star-tyrant went into a hideous rage, its corrupt and agitated energies filling the great hall. And when the quaking Ysss (even they feared the Dark Emperor's anger) brought word that Blorg the Devastator had been annihilated by Red Rian, Ylang's rage knew no bounds. Its huge mass of pulsating energy roared and exploded, erupting into firestorms behind the fleeing Ysss, as the manifested wrath of this immortal being assumed the aspect of a natural disaster. Panic cloaked the Forbidden City of Kordor, and every

living soul in the capital lay prostrate and cowering, praying for mercy.

As was usual in the aftermath of its rage, Ylang's energies were banked low; its mass was dark as a storm cloud, emitting only occasional muted rumblings and dim, fitful flashes. Nevertheless, its servants had all been so terrified by the hideous spectacle of frustration that the Ysss overlords were forced to use mind-raped slaves, those will-less zombies who had been mentally violated for the emperor's pleasure, to remove the last of the debris from the lair—the wreckage resulting from Ylang-Ylang's first encounter with the Fellowship of Light.

The work was directed personally by Aaasp, the overlord who had succeeded Lord Blorg as commander of all the empire's fighting forces. He did this at the vidscreens of the antechamber to the lair, issuing instructions to the shambling, burnt-out slaves by means of the telepathic powers he possessed in common with his brother-reptiloids.

In one short day, the five Ysss lords who had preceded him were all wiped out, and Aaasp suddenly found himself at the summit of ambition. But he did not allow himself the luxury of gloating over his good fortune, for the mighty Ylang could read the thoughts of all in Kordor . . . and the emperor was not in a benevolent mood. It was an awful responsibility, being directly accountable to the Great Devourer; but there was also the great reward: the unspeakable and unimaginable joy of communion with Ylang, that endless river of evil. The other Ysss had all listened to Blorg's mental cries of ecstasy as they waited in the antechamber, and they all lusted in their murderous hearts after the chance to share the unholy bliss of the Dark Emperor's embrace.

Ylang itself was submerged in the midnight sea of its

thoughts, pondering the amazing series of events that had come to pass in such a short span of time. The defeat of the star-armada represented the first set-back to the emperor's plans of conquest. But that in itself was of no major consequence, for starfleets and the beings that manned them were as toys to Ylang, expendable chess-pieces in the great galactic game.

Blorg's loss was another matter. The Devourer had labored long and hard to produce such a creature; the perfect engine of destruction. It had directed the evolution of the reptiloids of Sserp to that sole end. And Blorg was so utterly and remorselessly evil that Ylang had come to think of him as its spiritual son. But as it had cultivated Blorg, so it would cultivate Aaasp. The Ysss were a breed with great potential.

Certainly it had underestimated the wee mannikins who called themselves the Fellowship of Light. The three who had dared to stage a confrontation in the lair itself—Garthane, Dann Oryzon, and Camenarpo—had displayed rare courage and presence of mind. And the order's collective mental powers, while in no way the equal of its own, had impressed Ylang to regard the Fellowship as an opponent of some consequence. But as it had scanned the intruder's minds, taking their mental and genetic imprints unto itself at the same time, Ylang had discovered the actual strength of the order. Two hundred minds, mentalities humanoid and non-humanoid . . . hardly enough to represent an insurmountable obstacle.

Ylang had also experienced a profound feeling: the awakening of desire. Its interest in the great game had been rekindled. These Primulans, with their Fellowship of Light and their League of Free Worlds, had done it a great favor; they had provided relief from boredom, the curse of the immortal. The lair resounded to an explo-

sion, Ylang's equivalent of a burst of laughter, as the Dark Emperor recalled Red Rian's visit to Flaigon.

What splendid audacity! it thought, filling the stone hall with the bass rumblings of its amusement. *To rescue the humanoid female, Nila, this astral buccaneer summoned up the nerve to bargain with me–and that performance was a masterpiece of insincerity–and then offer to fight to the death with my son, Blorg the Devastator. I am developing a higher regard for these little creatures. What a treat it will be to taste of their agonies and incorporate their energies into mine!*

At last . . . opponents worthy of the game! Ylang's mass expanded, flooding the lair with stroboscopic bursts of light. *For the first time in aeons, the game interests me once more*!

The Devourer's thoughts turned to gluttony. *My lord Aaasp, come unto me. I would have you select some slaves–a full thousand. This is a day to be remembered, and I would feast!*

As the cyclopean doors swung open, groaning like a chorus of a hundred brass throats in torment, Aaasp staggered into the lair, shielding his eyes from the criminal brilliance of his master. And when he prostrated himself on the black floor before the Lord of Life and Death, he shuddered violently, causing his body-armor to *rat-a-tat-tat* on the stone in the manner of a drummer's taradiddle.

Ylang felt confusion and profound disappointment in the reptiloid's thoughts, but Aaasp's mind was in such a turmoil that the Dark Emperor had to request an explanation. And this alone was cause for high curiosity, for the Yssss are startled by few things. *Sweet lord Aaasp*, Ylang said, the rich, organtones of its mental voice booming mellifluously, *you are upset. What is it, my lord? What tidings do you bring me?*

As a state of extreme shock sometimes causes vocal creatures to lose the power of speech, so the mute and telepathic Ysss had lost control of the muscles of his mind. It was some time before he could clear his thought-patterns and convey his message to his lord and master. But when he finally spoke, Ylang was rewarded for its patience:

Great Ylang, I have just received a communication . . . Lord Blorg lives!

2/ Reunion On Aquaea

"Citizens of Aquaea. Citizens of Aquaea. This is Dann Oryzon of Merport speaking. I am coming in with the forces of the League of Free Worlds, and I ask you all to rise up and join us in the name of freedom and the great Mother Sea! Join with us now. We're coming in—the liberation of Aquaea has begun!"

Dann switched off the Hazard's transmitter and turned to Ween Leever. "How'd you ever manage to pipe us into the enemy's broadcast frequencies?"

The boy-genius lowered his head and shuffled his feet while he answered through a shy smile. He mumbled something about band alternators and parallel rectifiers. Dann understood very little of it.

A flat, mechanical voice sounded behind him as O-V-1, Ween's compulsive-talker of a robot, began to supply a clarification. "To simplify the preceding statement, Mr. Dann, one must appreciate the intrinsic nature of atmospheric communication. It is possible to override a broadcast frequency . . . "

"Save that for your next lecture, Ovie," Rian growled from the pilot's seat, causing Ween's techno-companion to *wow* into silence. The cat-man beside him growled softly as Rian spoke again, this time into the Hazard's intercom. "All hands stand by. There's a wave of enemy airships coming our way, on a three-

two-fiver heading. Gunners, peel your eyes and feel your trigger-fingers itch. I expect you to be able to blast the balls off a gnat at five hundred klectometers. Activate shields. I'm takin' 'er through. First man to score's the first man to get drunk when we touch down on Aquaea."

In Dann's honor, Rian took the Hazard in at the head of the first wave, and the young Aquaean had the unimpeded view that belongs to the leader of the pack. Beyond the ominous silhouettes of the black, approaching fighters, Dann could make out the outline of his hometown, Merport. As he sighted through the computer screen of his laser-cannon, hope welled up inside him with the rolling swells of the ocean below. Was his family still alive? And his best friend, Zak Spar?

The angry whine of a laser-beam, followed by the splat of its deflection by the Hazard's shielding, interrupted his thoughts. "Show time!" exclaimed Rian. "Fire at will!"

The empire fighters were no match for the firepower and screens of the Hazard, and the bright ship cut through their formation the way a hot knife cuts through a pat of butter. "Someone give me a count," Rian grunted, as he came out of a tight turn with a loop that sent the ship back at the enemy craft. On the computer screen, the sight of the distant fighters reminded Dann of a swarm of angry insects.

"Three down, one in trouble," was the answer to Rian's question.

The swarm of insects grew larger on the screen, proximity transforming them into a flock of steel ravens. "Is that all?" the skipper of the Hazard asked rhetorically. "Uncross your eyes, you Taylian myopics!"

From his protside gun-turret, Dann watched the computer screen that showed the ship's bow-cannon at

work. The fighters, already engaged by the main body of the League's ships, started to scramble as the Hazard came up behind them, strafing their tails with devastating accuracy. As the formation was again penetrated, Dann lined-up an empire fighter in his cross-hairs. He depressed the firing-button gently, and—*whaang! whaang!*—the cannon whined, and red laser-bolts lanced out to explode the enemy craft. *That one's for old man Maraner*! Dann thought, remembering his foster-father's death at the hands of the invaders.

"Score!" Rian barked, as the Hazard came out of the formation.

"Seven-and-a-half," came the reply over the intercom.

"That's better, mates . . . Hey—wait a minute! What the hell does that 'half' mean?"

"Aigron blew the tail offa one, but he thinks it got down okay."

"Oh." Rian nodded. Then he banked into another turn. "Okay, you spaceswabs: one more pass. If you don't double the score, I'm locking you all in the ship tonight, while I pay my respects to the ladies of Aquaea. When we're past 'em again, I'm taking us into Merport."

Dann held his breath when he heard Rian's last words. He squinted into the eyepiece of his gunsight and wondered whether Lii-arc sea-racer was still alive.

Haaass! Haaass! The sound of Blorg's stertorous breathing drowned out the gentle hum of the levitator that took him down to the city beneath the surface of dead Flaigon. Dwarfing the humanoid equerries who escorted him to the Forbidden City, the reptiloid lord stared vacantly at the door-panel in front of him. Since,

for some unknown reason, the Dark Emperor had not probed his consciousness once he touched-down on the black planet's surface, the lord of the Yss allowed himself the luxury of brooding over his recent misfortunes.

Not only had the mighty star-armada been demolished, thereby disrupting his plans for the conquest of the Primula galaxy, but that bearded man-ape, Rian, that hairy and disgusting piece of humanoid trash, had actually bested him in deep space combat. And the worst was yet to come: he must now answer for his disgrace and defeat to Ylang-Ylang, the only thing he feared in this life. It was a dark day for Lord Blorg and, as he left the levitator and strode through the eerie and self-illuminated corridors of black rock that led to the lair, the weight of fear lay on his body with the pressure of several dense atmospheres.

Entering the antechamber, he received the four-armed salutes of the gathered Ysss overlords. Aaasp bowed low as he passed, and looked away. Blorg shielded his thoughts and, in passing, darted a contemptuous glance at Aaasp. He noted the absence of several familiar forms: Kaag and Kraaass, his brood-brother, Haaang, his palace-ally Luurq—all dead. His successor had much to gain from his disgrace. As the doors to the lair swung open, a rush of horror chilled the air between his scales and the black body armor he wore. And when the mindless herald roared, "My lord Blorg!" in a voice as cold and empty as the deserts of Sserp, he felt the hand of death clutching at his heart.

The lair was ablaze with an impure, flickering light and the lord of the Ysss shielded his eyes, clapping his black-gloved hands over the one-way visor of his helmet, as he beheld the vortex of energy that was the Dark Emperor.

As the massive doors swung open, revealing the figure of a cloaked giant with four arms, dressed all in black except for the three blood-red plumes that surmounted its helmet, Ylang-Ylang's mental voice reverberated throughout the huge stone chamber with the resonance of thunder in a cathedral. *Approach me, Lord Blorg!* it boomed, in a voice like the crack of doom.

Haaass! Haaass! As he approached the emperor, Blorg's body jerked like a marionette, and fear was the puppet-master. Tremors ran over his frame the way a plain rolls to an earthquake, and his guts churned and bubbled like a cauldron in hell. When he collapsed before his master in the ritual act of prostration, the serpent-lord felt the shadowy substance of Ylang's mind embracing his consciousness. His lidless eyes had no tear-ducts, but Blorg wept in his heart.

Primula remains free; the greatest armada ever seen among the stars is destroyed; and my Supreme Commander has been defeated by a rabble of mystics, merchants and pirates: How shall I repay my lord Blorg?

Haaa-aa-ass! Haaa-aa-aas! Blorg's terror infiltrated his lungs with the suffocating cold of the airless void. What Ylang asked was tantamount of ordering him to design the sleek vehicle of his own death!

Ylang consumed bodies and energies wholesale—hundreds at a time, one after the other; the Great Devourer's most fearsome aspect was his evil and gluttonous appetite. And Blorg's fear, the terror of this otherwise fearless engine of destruction, was a delicacy to it—a caviar of the spirit. Ylang savored the reptiloid's fear with the delectation of a connoisseur sampling the rarest of wines; the awful game would be played out until, sip by sip, the cup had been drained.

What shall be my lord's reward, O Blorg of the

thousand tortures? What does he deserve?

Blorg's only replay was a telepathic wail, as dread atomized his thoughts to the gibberish of panic.

Was not Blorg elevated to sit at the right hand of Ylang? Should not his reward be elevated above all things as well?

Voiding and convulsive, Blorg was received into the mercy of unconsciousness. With a mental sign that ran down the chromatic scale, Ylang acknowledged its satisfaction. The cup was drained; the reptiloid was an empty vessel . . .

Haaa-aa-aa-aaass! When Blorg awoke, he felt a savage joy rising in the chambers of his dark heart, crowding out even the surprise he felt at still being alive. In the outermost sectors of his mind he could hear the glorious song of the angel of the pit. It seemed to him that even the molecules of his body hummed to that obscene music of pure evil, that malevolent hymn in celebration of mindless and transcendant destructiveness. Instead of death, Ylang was granting him its greatest reward: entry into the domain of its murderous and inconceivable ecstasies!

Ylang welcomes its creation . . . its son! the Devourer purred, causing th blood of all in Kordor to run as cold as a polar sea. *And chooses to admit him to its heart. Blorg had done well, and found worthy opponents for his sire, and lifted from its neck the heavy yoke of boredom.* The lair darkened rapidly, as Ylang banked its energies and condensed its mass into an onyx cloud whose outer tendrils lapped at Blorg's recumbent form.*How was my son spared?*

The lord of the Ysss concentrated his thoughts, deferring the promise of delicious surrender in order to reply. *As I have learned from you, O Lord of Life and Death, I attempt to prepare for all eventualities. In-*

ncible as I imagined the flagship, Devastator, to be, et did I have it equipped with an ejector-capsule of surassing speed and quality. And so, when the scum of a rate, Rian, overcame my screens and backed up my actors, I was able to jettison and escape before the nal explosion consumed the starship. The force of that last sent my capsule far out into the void and knocked e unconscious . . . But not before I had activated my cer-signal, whose code is known throughout all the mpire starfleets . . .

He was almost enveloped in the glowing fog of lang's outer blackness, and Blorg felt his mental conol dissipating. *One of the armada's retreating forward outs picked me up and transferred my capsule to the estroyer, Nightfall . . . one of the few vessels to reach yperspace intact . . . And now your dedicated servant as returned.*

As the tendrils of black fog encircled his body, lorg's eyes rolled up in his head. Just before he sank nto an ocean of annihilative visions, he heard his lord nce more:

Be restored now, sweet Blorg. And later, we shall atch grand schemes together. . .

The fighting was hard, but nevertheless, the liberaion of Aquaea was accomplished swiftly. The people of he waterworld were still warmed by the fires of anger nd resentment kindled by the coming of the savage nvaders; they had not been slaves of the Dark Empire ong enough to see their hostility melt into submission.

Acts of ambush, sabotage and assassination were erformed on a grand scale, as the Aquaeans avenged hemselves on their conquerors at every opportunity. y the time the League forces rolled into the cities, the kies dominated by their bright aircraft and transports,

the empire's hold on the land had already been seriousl weakened. As violence begets violence, so the barba ity of the empire's invasion and occupation bred i counterpart in the terrible retaliation of the populac War is a disease of the spirit, and there is no need t dwell on its pathology here. Let it be sufficient to sa that the invaders sowed dragon's teeth and reaped harvest of blood. And then one day, after the madnes and carnage had subsided, Aquaea was free once mor

Dann Oryzon studied the lines of black-uniforme prisoners that stretched along Merport's centr boulevard as he marched down to the slave-pens at th spaceport's transshipment center. He felt relieved a having been spared the tragedy of the occupation, time when the greatest crime was the assertion human dignity. The human Aquaeans had cried fo further revenge until Garthane himself went to the Me port com-center and addressed them on the nation vidscreens. He argued for mercy, and proposed that th captive soldiers of the Dark Empire, themselves virtua slaves of Ylang, should devote all their energies to th rebuilding of the waterworld's cities. For the uppe echelon officers, there would be a trial, where the would have to account for their war-crimes. The Hig Master, in the name of the Fellowship, ancient guardia of the galaxy, invoked the Infinite and the spirit of life a he asked the Aquaeans to show goodness, mercy an justice in their judgments. The sensors at eac vidscreen site registered and transmitted the feelings o the people as they decided the fate of the invaders Dann was proud of his fellow-citizens; they had side with the forces of life.

His heart fluttered like a wounded bird when th entered the slave-pens with the liberation force. Th place reeked like a stockyard, reminding him of th

talls where he was held prisoner on the empire's gar- untuan slaver. How could sentient creatures pen their rothers and sisters in such a filthy and horrible place? low could they stand to inflict unthinkable cruelties on hem, violating not only their bodies and minds, but heir souls as well? The god-like and immortal Ylang's ifts to the sentient beings of the cosmos were rape and murder and violations of the spirit. They had to fight Ylang; and they had to win: there was no other alterna- ive. Death itself, the thing that mortals fear most, was referable to the dominion of the Dark Emperor.

Tears ran down his cheeks as Dann walked through he pens, looking for his family. The sight of his wounded, suffering people, many of them neighbors nd schoolmates, tore at his heart with the claws of a vulture. He stopped to wipe his eyes.

"Dann? . . . Is that my Danni? Oh, thank the great Sea!" A croaking voice caused him to open his eyes and urn to the left. He saw an old woman reaching out to him. *It was Mrs. Maraner–his foster-mother!* They ame together, and Dann embraced the woman who had loved him as much as she had loved her own chil- dren. She cried and he cried, and neither could speak for several minutes. When he finally able to talk, Dann held Mrs. Maraner at arm's-length, looked into her eyes and asked the question that had haunted him for months. "Talli and Nona . . . Gen . . . Zak Spar and his mother . . .? How are they?"

In the seconds it took Mrs. Maraner to answer, he relived that moment during the invasion when he awoke after the explosion of the homing-missile and saw the dead bodies of Mr. Spar, old man Maraner and his young foster-brother, Orlow.

"The girls are here. So's Niva Spar. Gen . . . " The old woman's voice broke, and sadness clouded her

eyes. "Gen died two months ago."

He held her close, as she sobbed in that strange, quiet way of hers. He had loved his foster-brothers, and they had loved him; now both of them were gone . . . No, not gone—transformed; taken back into the dark heart of the Infinite, where their bright energies would be re-channeled into other forms of existence.

"And Zak Spar?" Dann asked, his heartbeat quickening as he did. Zak was not to be seen after the explosion, and Dann had always permitted himself the luxury of believing that his best friend was still alive.

"Nobody knows," replied Mrs. Maraner. "They came and took us away. We never saw him again."

And Dann wondered whether he would ever see him again, either . . .

That evening, the League held a banquet in honor of these who had lost their lives in the Dark Empire (great events and occasions are always celebrated by banquets in the Primula galaxy). As Dann entered the assembly hall in the company of Nila, Rian, Purpur and Ween Leever, a man approached them. It was Commander Marmor, chief of the Liberation forces.

"Come over here, son," Marmor said. "I want you to meet some good people." Dann nodded, smiling in spite of himself. The commander was a touch and taciturn old bird who reminded him of old man Maraner. He followed Marmor, who stopped in front of a group of young Aquaean males and females in camouflage fatigues. Dann looked at them for a long time before he recognized his old friends, schoolmates and sweethearts. He yelped with surprise as they surrounded him, the men shaking his hand and slapping his back, the women rumpling his hair and smacking kisses on his face and head. *They all look so grown-up,* he thought. *So much older than I remembered them.*

Suddenly, a voice came from the rear of the group; Dann straightened up and stood as still as a calcinite statue. "That can't be Dann Oryzon," it said. "He was the hottest hydro-jockey from Merport to Seaville . . . and this guy's a landlubber, if I ever saw one."

"*Zak!*" Dan shouted, pushing his way through the crowd of young resistance-fighters. "*Zak Spar!*" And then before him, he saw the tall, rangy frame of his best friend. He looked up into Zak's smiling and full-bearded face. "Hey!" he exclaimed, grabbing him by the beard. "Where'd you get the bird's nest?"

"It's a face-warmer," Zak replied. "It gets pretty cold up there in the hills, Danni."

The two young men grew serious as they spoke of the loved ones they had lost. The embraced, and then shook hands solemnly, in the two-handed fashion of Aquaean humans.

"That's Dann's best friend, y'know," Ween Leever told Rian, as they watched the reunion. "He always used to tell me about him. Never knew if he was alive or dead." A wistful note entered his voice. "Maybe someday I'll see my friends again."

As Nila hugged Ween, Rian thought of the friends and loved ones he had left behind on Urgel. He would never see them again . . . not in this life. "Yeah," he answered, his voice barely audible. "Yeah." It was all he could say.

Dann brought Zak over, and introduced him to his companions. "This is my buddy, Zak Spar," he said simply.

Zak was charmed by Nila, awed by Rian, relieved by Ween's shyness, and flabbergasted when the towering Purpur shook his hand and meowed. "You're the heroes of the galaxy," Zak said, wonder making his voice as bright as the plates on the Hazard's hull.

"All in a day's work," Rian remarked, with a wave o his hand and a shrug of his shoulders.

"Captain Rian's modesty makes it seem just a shad easier than it actually was," Nila said, turning Zak' knees to jelly with her smile.

"How'd you ever get away, ol' buddy?" Dann asked freeing Zak from Nila's gentle spell.

"Luck." Zak shrugged as he turned to his friend "Just plain ol' good luck."

"What kind of luck?"

"Well, when that homie's minimissile went off in ou house, the concussion blew me right out the window. landed smack in the middle of that big, ugly Ekr bush—you know, the one I always hated to trim—an the empire soldiers didn't even see me. When I came to they where gone. So I lit out for the hills."

"You always were lucky, Zakki," Dann said. He fe a hand on his shoulder, and turned around to see Garth ane beside him, smiling like the sun on a summer's day "Zak Spar," he said, putting an arm around the shou ders of both men, "I'd like you to meet Garthane, Hig Master of the Fellowship of Light . . . my father."

Dann relished the effect his announcement had on hi friend. If Zak's mouth had opened any wider, he coul have docked a hydro-skimmer in it.

"May the waters favor you, sir," Zak said, using th Aquaean benediction, shaking Garthane's hand as if h were using a manual bilge pump. "Your son's quite guy, I can tell you. The best there is."

"The Infinite be with you," Garthane replied, re sponding with equal courtesy. "My son's merit show itself in his choice of friends, Zak Spar."

Zak gulped as the great man said this. He lowered hi eyes and mumbled, "Thank you, sir."

When he looked up, Zak found himself surrounde

y smiles. Dann broke the silence as he spoke to his ompanions.

"The waters have favored me today," he said. "To-morrow, they will favor you."

Tanella I and II, the twin suns that warmed Aquaea, hone gently through the waterworld's enveloping loudbanks, causing the hydro-skimmer that carried Dann and his companions to cast a soft, double shadow n the surface of the ocean. The craft was headed out oward the heart of the Western Sea, as Dann went in earch of his former guardian, Lii-Arc, chief of the Quee, the dolphin-folk who inhabit the planet's waters.

The night before, when Dann informed his friends of his plan to take them into the waters and introduce them to Lii-Arc, they were excited by the prospect, and eadily agreed to go with him. But there were two notable exceptions: Rian and Purpur.

"I've strung out the stars like pearls on a necklace," the pirate said, "and descended into the bowels of the black planet. But I'll be damned if I stick my head under water for anyone!"

Purpur's reaction was one of puzzlement. It was his custom to eat fish, not consort with them.

"It's all right, Purr," Nila said, stroking the felinoid's luminous silver mane. "The Quee are mammals, just as we are."

"Yeah," grunted Rian. "Just one big, happy family. Well, you people just go right ahead and turn yourselves into fishbait if you want to, but I've got absolutely no interest in piscine affairs."

"Don't tell me you're . . . afraid to come with us?" Nila asked teasingly.

The skipper of the Hazard glowered at her. "Lady,

the thing that can scare Red Rian hasn't been create yet. Ask your late pal, Blorg, how frightened I can get Or that pile of radioactive debris who runs the Dar Empire."

"Come on, Rian," Ween Leever said. "We're gonn see things that almost no one else has ever seen. Aren' you curious?"

"Nah. Count me out." Rian replied, affecting an ai of unconcern as he turned away from his compansions

"I've never known you to back away from anything Rian," said Nila.

"I'm *not* backing away," he replied, without turnin around to face her. "It's just that I . . . "

"What is it, then?" she asked gently.

When Red Rian turned around, he had a sheepish gri on his face. His hands flapped helplessly at his sides lik fish dying on a beach. "I can't swim," he muttered.

Two hours before they they went out on the ocean Dann took Rian and Purpur to Merport's municipa pool, gave them depth-suits (he'd ordered a special on made for the giant cat-man the day before), and showe them how to negotiate the fluid medium.

It turned out to be an experience he would neve forget, what with Purpur clawing the water and yowlin with fear, and Rian bonking his head on the bottom o the pool, his hands and feet working totally independen of each other, all the while spluttering a string o obscenities never before heard in the Primula galaxy. Dann laughed until his sides ached and the visor of his depth-suit fogged over.

But by the end of the session, his pupils had bee transformed into passable swimmers. In fact, Purpur, once he accepted the properties of the new medium, was able to move about in the water almost as gracefully as he did on land; and Rian displayed a stroke and kick

well worth developing. They would be all right in the Western Sea.

When the hydro-glider was about two hours out of Merport, Rian even began to boast about how easily had had mastered the art of swimming, how naturally it had all come to him. "It's actually very simple," he said. "All you've got to do is let go, and trust your instincts."

He was about to elaborate, but was interrupted by a shriek of laughter. He looked around and saw Dann, doubled-up over the glider's port rail, guffawing loudly as he recalled the sight of the skipper of the Hazard during the first part of the swimming lesson.

Rian's jaw snapped shut and his eyes went wide. The crimson flush that spread over his face muted the auburn of his long hair and beard. He muttered something about wanting to check-out the hydro-glider's instrument panel and stalked off.

Purpur's massive frame shook with silent cat-laughter. "You mean he was just star-gassing again?" Ween Leever asked when Dann finally straightened-up. Even Garthane was chuckling. Nila summed it up best, in her courteous way: "He does tend to exaggerate somewhat, doesn't he?"

An hour later, Dann took the wheel from Zak, mentally contrasting the happy voyage with the last one they had taken together on the day that the skies went dark with aircraft and Merport burned in the distance.

After being at the wheel a half hour, Dann was greeted by the breathtaking sight of hundreds of sleek, gleaming shapes breaking the water, leaping high into the air, and then diving back into the sea. *The journey's over,* he thought. *Lii-Arc searacer is here!*

Immediately after this sight, Dann cut the engines, dropped anchor, left the cabin, and told his companions

to don their depth-suits. He was the first one to go over the side. Red Rian, not to be outdone in front of Nila, followed hard on the young Aquaean's heels. But he lost his footing on the slippery rail, and pitched head-first into the water like a fish dropped from the claws of some clumsy sea bird.

As his suit's scanners *bleeped* a soft tattoo, Dann peered through his visor and watched the silvery form in the distance grow larger with its approach. Then, when the great dolphin turned and went into the infinity-symbol-loop that the Quee used to greet their own, Dan's heart leaped with it. He dove forward and kicked off, leaving his friends behind as he went to greet his spiritual father.

"Lii-Arc!" he cried through his suit's speaker in delphinese, the barking, tweeting speech of the Quee. "Lii-Arc sea-racer, father of my heart!" The great dolphin circled him three times, nudging him affectionately as it did. "Dan Oryzon, son of my soul!" it said in the difficult speech of humans. Then, as the young man put his arm over the back of the chief of the Quee, each reverted to the language he was most at home in.

"The child of my spirit has done many wondrous things,". Lii-Arc said. "And now he knows what I could not tell him."

"Yes, I know now, master of the waters," Dann replied. "I know who my parents were, and why I was brought to Aquaea. And I have brought those I love to meet you."

They swam over the six depth-suited and waiting figures. The dolphin-chief glided back and forth before them, stopping when Garthane spoke to him in delphinese and stroked his underbelly. "I am pleased to see my lord again," the High Master said. "And I thank him with all my heart for guiding the growth of my son's

spirit."

"No thanks are necessary, Master Garthane," Lii-Arc replied. "Rather than having given me a burden, you added to my joys." He rubbed up against the High Master, who now stroked him with both hands.

Acting as translator, Dann introduced Lii-Arc to his friends. All were greeted courteously and complimented by the master of the seaways. When Lii-Arc spoke to Red Rian, he could not resist adding these words, referring to the star-pirate's clumsy plunge into the waters of the Western Sea: "The son of my spirit is most fortunate to have a friend who is such a fine diver."

To everyone's surprise, Rian parried this affectionate thrust with much aplomb. "My lord will be amazed," he said, "to learn that his son's friend mastered the waters in only two short hours."

Lii-Arc broke out into the trilling, high-pitched laughter of the Quee. "Captain Rian," he said when he had recovered, "is now at home in the water as well as deep space. In the name of my people, I bid you all welcome." He turned away from them and emitted a series of whistling sounds.

Dann's scanners began to sound again, and in a few moments he could see the tribe approaching, swimming just below the ocean's surface, their backs gleaming in the sunlight like silver torpedos. The dolphins recognized Dann, and saluted him as befits a sea-brother of the Quee. When they had gathered around the visitors, Lii-Arc introduced Dann's companions.

Purpur was the center of attraction, and the dolphins nudged each other aside in their curiosity, trying to peer into the visor of the cat-man's depth-suit. Humans they were used to, but the felinoid was a creature they had never seen before, Purpur being the first of his kind ever

to venture beneath the waters. At first he yowled, unsettled by the presence of beings who resembled fish larger than himself. But the friendly, gentle manner of the Quee soon had him purring through his speaker and stroking the bellies of those closest to him, while the dolphins cooed and tweeted in appeciation of his affectionate nature. And Rian translated his cat-speech to Dann, who translated it in turn into delphinese, while Purpur told the Quee of the felinoids of Yahwoo.

"Well, you fat old tabby," Rian said, nudging his friend at the end of the latter's recital, "that's gonna make one hell of a tale when we liberate Yahwoo." Purpur nodded, warmed by memories of his homeworld.

Lii-Arc questioned Garthane about his and Dann's adventures, and was told of the armada's end, Blorg's death, and the horror and power that was Ylang-Ylang. Then the dolphin-lord told his guest of the part his people had played in the resistance struggle.

The Quee danced in honor of their guests, and Dann's companions were overwhelmed by the grace and beauty of their performance. And as they said farewell to the visitors, Ween Leever amused them greatly by asking technical questions and then delivering long-winded explanations regarding the use of sonar and the potential of echolocation systems. Rian groaned, and told Ween he considered his explanations to be about as relevant as lecturing the birds on flight.

That night, on the way back to Merport, Dann and Nila stood together at the stern of the glider, looking out over the board expanse of the ocean. "You must be very happy tonight," she said, taking his hand. "Your cup is full."

He raised a finger in the air. "Almost full, though only a madman would dare to ask for more. But I can

still hope."

Nila responded to this in a low, musical voice. "Yes. You can still hope."

Score one for the kid from Aquaea, Red Rian thought, as he came out of the cabin and saw the pair kissing, silhouetted against the moonlit sea. He sighed as the weight of discouragement made itself felt in his insides like ballast settling in the hold of a freighter.

"Well," he said, muttering to the waves of the Western Sea, "there's always Ylang . . . "

When Blorg emerged from the monstrous dream-world of Ylang's ecstasies, the first thing he did was to ask his lord and master to grant him one thing.

What is that one thing, my sweet Blorg? the Devourer asked, thundering contentedly.

The privilege of killing Aaasp. For he has governed, albeit briefly, in my stead, and will never again be be satisfied with a lesser position. Discipline requires this as well. So I ask you to grant me this privilege, Father Ylang.

That is no privilege, my son, the Devourer purred. *That is your right.*

When Dann docked the hydro-glider at Merport's central pier, another reunion was in store for him: Altektu and D-Anacom had come to Aquaae. The android couple were as warm and gracious as ever; their eyes still shone like diamonds in the green setting of their permaflesh features, and their slender hands still moved through the air with all the grace of temple-dancers. They received a warm welcome from Garthane and the others and were introduced to Zak, who was leaving that night to teach guerrilla warfare to the League's forces. Only Rian was aloof and reserved in his greet-

ing. Altektu and his consort were hurt by this, but they said nothing.

"Say, skipper, y'know something?" Ween Leever hissed out of the side of his mouth, as Dann and the androids walked ahead of the group. "You're a bigot. A snob and a bigot."

Rian glowered at him. "Don't give me that crap, you baggy-eyed little Andy-Lover," he side-mouthed back at Ween. "How many times have I got to say it before the message penetrates your dura-plated skull: A man's a man, and a machine's a machine . . . and both should know their place."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple any more, Captain Rian," Garthane said, having overheard the exchange. He turned and walked alongside the pirate. "Androids such as Altektu and D-Anacom have been self-refining entities for several centuries now. In fact they have been directed their evolution to the point where they possess most of our virtues and few of our faults. You might even consider them the possessors, in their electronic way, of souls the equal of our own. The only differences between them and ourselves are that they are no self-reproducing and have no need to breathe."

Rian greatly respected the High Master, and tried to listen to him with an open mind.

"And did you know," continued Garthane, "That their secret word for us—breathing creatures, that is—was coined by Altektu himself? They call us biomechs . . . And I should think that their kindness and respect for life in all its forms would serve an example to sinners like ourselves."

Rian thought about the affection the androids displayed toward Dann and each other. "But that's just what annoys me," he replied, "they way they ape human behavior, the way they seem to actually be . . ."

"In love?" Garthane asked.

"Yeah, as if they really . . . "

"They *do* mean it, Captain Rian."

This made the buccaneer wince as if he had been stabbed. The High Master had an uncanny habit of finishing the star-pirate's sentences when ever he wanted to convince him of something.

"You mean . . .?"

"Yes I do, Captain. If you would risk your affections more often—the lady Nila excepted, of course—they would be returned more frequently."

Rian felt a warm flush creep up the back of his neck. Garthane was right, as usual. He had just realized that his failure to recognize the android pair's spiritual and emotional existence had its roots in his own fear of opening up, of making himself *vulnerable* to life.

He lowered his head and puffed-out his cheeks, as he began to study the moon's reflection in the toe of his glossy boot. Several seconds passed before he looked up again, a humbler man than the one who had looked down. "Excuse me, sir," he said to Garthane as he walked away from him. "I've got some dues to pay."

The two androids were still talking to Dann when Red Rian came up beside them. He hemmed and hawed until they turned to face him. "Sir, lady," he said, sweating and breathing heavily. "Uh, Al, D-Ana . . . " Rian used the forms the couple preferred when addressed by their friends. "I've, uh . . . come to ask your forgiveness for my, ah-h-hhh . . . stupidity. I haven't been very fair to you, and . . . "

The androids smiled at him sympathetically. They knew how hard it must be for him, the ultimate self-sufficient man, to apologize to anyone. "No need to say more," D-Ana said, touching his arm with her cool

fingers. "We understand."

"And we thank you, Captain Rian," Altektu added, "for this great courtesy."

"Oh-h-h-hhh," Rian said, wheezing his relief like a busted bellows, "thanks a lot, you two." He backed off, grinning like a idiot, his hands fish-flapping for the second time that day. "I, uh . . . think I'll be going back to headquarters, folks. I've, uh . . . got a bunch of things to do, you know." Again he grinned that idiot-grin of extreme embarassment. "See you around."

Thump! He stepped into a coil of rope by the entrance to the pier, and fell flat on his back. His friends all crowded around him and helped Rian to his feet. No one laughed . . . not a soul. And best of all, Nila gave him a big kiss before he left, and whispered, "You're even braver than I thought, skipper."

The pirate whistled *The Girl from the Outworlds* all the way back to his quarters. *All things considered,* he thought, *it hasn't been such a bad day at all.*

3 / Strategies and Starships

Whaang! Whaang! Haaass! Red laser-beams whined over his head and flared in the dim corridor as Aaasp scrambled around a corner, gasping for breath. Blorg the Devastator was hot on his trail. Aaasp lurched down another corridor and headed for the shadowy pile of ruins that marked the site of the oldest part of the ancient city. Once he entered that cyclopean maze of rubble and fallen stone, he was sure that the lord of the Ysss would never find him.

Racing around another corner, Aaasp lost his footing on the damp stone and rolled down the steep incline that led to the abandoned palaces of Kordor's long-dead founders. As he got to his feet he cursed his luck, and he cursed the day he was hatched in the rocky lowlands of his native Sserp. The stewardship of the Dark Empire should have been his to keep, but Blorg, with the luck of Hiisazel the serpent-god, had miraculously been snatched from the jaws of implacable death. And now the Devastator, who brooked no competition when it came to Ylang's favors, was after him, determined to add Aaasp's number to the legions of hell.

He entered the ruins and ducked behind an enormous fallen column carved in high-relief with the hideous images of the ancient Mordlings. Ahead lay a virtual

labyrinth of stone and metal, the debris of the oldest civilization in the whole of the known universe. The darkness before him promised safety and time to think, time to devise a plan whereby he could save his own life. Breathing heavily, the reptiloid sat down on a ledge of stone. He was not afraid (for the Ysss fear only Ylang), but his reptilian instinct for survival was functioning at its highest level. He relaxed, and began to think of the best way of contacting the Dark Emperor, who would surely (in light of his past services) intervene in his behalf.

Haaass! Aaasp sat up suddenly, as a small stone rulled down from above and bounced off his boot. Peering through his visor, the reptiloid looked up, the pupils of his lidless eyes dilating with the attempt to see into the surrounding gloom. He thought he could make out a shape in the blackness, the shape of something large, something tensed and ready to strike. Aaasp sent his thoughts out to probe the mind of the thing above him. *Haaa-aa-ass*! To his shock, they were met by the cold thoughts of Blorg himself!

Surprised, my lord Aaasp? Well, don't be. You're not the first to be hunted in this place. Aaasp heard the click of a switch, followed by the crackling hum of an infrared heat-scanner's activation. *No one escapes me. You should know that*. Aaasp slid off the ledge and straightened up, backing into a smooth mass of polished stone that felt as cold as the grave. Then, in his mind, he heard Blorg pronounce the ritual formula of the Ysss, the one they always used before a killing: *Death make you welcome*. The scarlet flare of the laser-rifle was the last thing Aaasp ever saw . . .

On the way back to their quarters, the android couple informed Dann of their plans. "We are returning to

Astyx," D-Ana said. Dann remembered the city and its Pleasure Dome, that incredible psycho-sensorium where he had first met his two friends. "On Garthane's advice, the League has ordered the conversion of the Pleasure Dome into a treatment center for the psychic casualties of the Dark Empire's brutality."

"D-Ana and I have been chosen to head this project," said Altektu.

"They couldn't have picked anyone better," Dann replied, shaking Altektu's hand and kissing D-Ana on the cheek. "You did a hell of a job on me. This is certainly a challenge worthy of your skills."

"You must visit us at the center when you have time," Altektu said as they entered the android couple's quarters.

"As soon as I'm able, Al," Dann replied.

"And now, we'd like you to meet someone," D-Ana said, opening the door to the room adjoining the one they were in.

Dann followed them in, and saw a young woman looking out of a window, staring up into the gentle night of Aquaea. She stiffened involuntarily when they entered, but made no move to acknowledge their presence.

"Val," D-Ana said softly, "we've brought someone to meet you." The young woman continued to stare out into the night.

The androids approached and flanked her, D-Ana stroking her hair and Altektu taking her hand in his own.

"Our friend is here," Altektu said in a gentle voice. "The one we told you about. We love and trust him very much, and wish to share him with you." The young woman still did not move from the window. "He won't hurt you, Val," D-Ana said soothingly. "He is very kind, very gentle. Turn around and see him."

Slowly with the movement of someone caught in a bad dream, she turned to face Dann. And as she did, the sight of her beauty made him catch his breath. She was small and finely made, yet full-bodied for all her delicate appearance. Her hair, dark as midnight in the depths of the ocean, rolled down to her waist in lustrous waves. The perfect oval of her face was as lovely as any Dann had ever seen, with its high cheekbones, slender and aquiline nose, full lips, and vaulting eyebrows. And her eyes were dark, reflecting the room's light the way deep mountain pools reflect the stars. But those pools were troubled; they ran cold, fed by the springs of pain and terror.

"Valennia," D-Ana said, "this is Dan Oryzon. He's a native of this world."

"I'm glad to meet you, Valennia," Dann said, smiling at her. But she made no reply, and merely continued to stare at him. When he looked into her eyes again, Dann realized that she was hiding somewhere deep within herself.

"Use your powers of mind, Dann," Altektu whispered. "Go inside her mind and comfort her. Find out why she won't speak to anyone."

Dann gazed into Valennia's eyes and gently entered her mind, using the powers he had acquired through his initiation into the Fellowship of Light. *Don't be afraid*, he thought to her. *I won't hurt you in any way.*

I feel you inside me, her thought-voice replied. *Please don't hurt me . . . If you do, I'll kill myself. I swear it.*

No, I won't. You're the friend of those I love and trust. And I'm asking you to trust me.

Don't hurt me any more . . . I hurt so much already.

I won't. I swear it by the Infinite–the source of all life.

Then she nodded almost imperceptibly, and opened her mind to Dann Oryzon.

In a turbulent montage of images, he saw the mosaic of her life on Dusilium, a world in the same sector of the Primula galaxy as Aquaea:

Loving family, friends, a happy childhood. Adolescence and initiation into the mysteries of womanhood. Academic honors. The face of a smiling young man, Valennia's sweetheart . . .

Then a shriek rang out in her mind, as Dann saw the chillingly-familiar sight of the black-uniformed invaders. He saw the young man die, lasered-down by the empire's soldiers.

Valennia began to sob quietly. Altektu and D-Anacom glanced at each other.

What happened then, Valennia? Dann asked, caressing her mind as he coaxed her to continue.

Horrible. It's horrible, her mental-voice replied, quavering with the onset of panic.

Dann radiated his inner tranquility at her. *It's best to get it out. Then Al and D-Ana can help you get rid of your pain. I'll tell them, and they'll be able to help you. I swear it.*

Gradually, the painful thoughts formed themselves into blurred and jagged images, as Dann saw the torture and execution of her parents through Valennia's own eyes. Then a towering Ysss appeared in her thoughts; he felt the chill recollection of its cold, probing mind, and the strings of its serpentine threats and mental tortures.

Tears flooded Valennia's eyes and ran down her cheeks in rivulets. Her sobs grew louder; her body started to heave.

Altektu took D-Anacom's hand. "That's the first time she's been able to shed tears," he whispered.

Dann saw the Ysss turn away with a wave of its hand. Suddenly, he felt a tug and heard the sound of fabric tearing. Then, as Valennia must have turned, so did her memories. Dann saw a pack of leering, humanoid soldiers closing in, their hands flexed into claws, the reek of their sweat strong and acrid in the air. One face came closer than the others, and Dann felt Valennia's body heave as she recalled the way she spat into it with all the force she could muster. The face went out-of-focus, and its lips closed over hers brutally, bringing the salt taste of blood to Dann's mind. Hands tore at her body, ripping away her clothing. The weight of the body behind the cruel mouth took Valennia down to the floor. Hands grasped her limbs roughly, and wrenched them apart. And then . . .

Valennia screamed like a wounded animal, and collapsed in Dann's arms. The two androids came up, and helped him carry her over to the bed across the room. When they had put her down, Dann told his friends all he had seen and felt in her mind. "It was horrible," he said.

Altektu shook his head. "No wonder she would not speak."

"Now we know what to do for her," D-Ana said. They both thanked him.

"I tried to comfort her as best I could," Dann told them. "She's suffered an awful lot."

Valennia's eyelids began to flutter. They all leaned over the bed as she regained consciousness. At first she did not recognize them, but then her features softened as she realized where she was. Dann stared into the dark pools of her eyes; they seemed to sparkle with a softer light than before. She reached out, took his hand, and spoke the first words she had uttered in many long months:

"Thank you ... Dann Oryzon," she said, squeezing his hand.

Dann was so moved by this he could hardly speak. "Be well, Valennia," he whispered. "I have to leave for Aurea Solis tonight, so I'll say goodbye now. Trust your best instincts."

"May we meet again," she whispered.

Dann smiled at her.

What you see before you, my lord Blorg, are the tools of the Mordlings, the mightiest race ever to walk beneath any sun.

Mighty Ylang honors its servant with the sight of the hidden workshops of its ancestors.

It is time again that the science of the Mordlings be enlisted in the service of conquest and comination, the end to which it was ordained, Ylang replied, its thoughts guiding Blorg's steps.

The reptiloid shook his head in wonder as he surveyed the great vaulted workshops of the titanic breed that had ruled the Morde galaxy ages ago. The strange, intricate machines were built to be manned by giants, and the reptiloid realized that creatures of his size could never hope to operate them. *But my lord,* he thought, baffled by this problem, *no creatures exist who possess the size and competence to run these wondrous machines.*

Then we shall have to create them, purred Ylang, thundering in its distant lair.

All things are possible for the Master of the Universe, Blorg replied to the tyrant. *Will mighty Ylang father a race of giants, and endow them with the requisite intelligence?*

Ylang will do more than that. The answer to his question came couched in the chilling waves of the Dark Emperor's obscene metal-laughter. *Ylang will embody*

a paradox, and father its fathers.

Haaass! Blorg never understood the emperor when it spoke like that. *Please enlighten your servant, great Ylang.*

Again Blorg's mind was buffeted by the awful laughter of the Devourer. *Can my sweet Blorg not guess?*

The lord of the Ysss thought for a moment. *I cannot comprehend this riddle, my father.* He smelt the sour reek of Ylang's disappointment.

It is unfortunate, it sighed, *that my lord Blorg is proficient only at those games which entail suffering and death. By the statement, father my fathers, I mean that I would alone the likeness of my ancestors, the Mordlings.*

How will Ylang do that?

I shall take the genetic imprints of Mordlings, which I have within my memory-banks, and impose them on certain hospitable cell-cultures . . . thus recreating, in effect, my long-dead race. And then what will happen, my lord and master? Then, O Blorg, you shall see wonders.

When the Hazard had entered hyperspace, on its way to the golden planet, Red Rian left the control-center in the company of Garthane and went to Ween Leever's workshop. The boy-genius was celebrating his birthday by hosting a party for all his shipmates. Drinks were being served by the barrel-shaped roller-robot, and the party was already going at full-blast when the two men arrived. Garthane blessed Ween, and wished him a happy birthday. Rian winked, jabbed Ween with an elbow and said, "One step closer to the grave, eh, kiddo?" Ween rolled his eyes in the direction of the ship's upper-deck and groaned. It was his belief that everyone in this life had a burden of some kind to bear

. . . and Rian was surely his. He was so upset by the star-pirate's gallows-humor that he snatched a drink from the passing robot's tray.

O-V-1 immediately turned and reproached his master. "This *is* a departure from custom, Mr. Ween," it said, static filling in for emotional coloration on its talkie-track. "One's birthday is not a sufficient excuse for the surrender of virtue. And, as I'm sure you also know . . . "

Rian snorted into laughter as the garrulous robot droned on.

"Mind your own business, Ovie," Ween snapped, blushing to the roots of his frizzy, blond hair. "You can just shut you—no, wait a minute, I've got a better idea. Why don't you talk to Captain Rian a while? He's obviously very interested in what you're saying." Ween grinned maliciously at his skipper and arch-tormentor.

"Captain Rian," the robot said, making the conversational transition without missing a beat, "you're a man of vast experience. Do you think it right that a person, one who never touches a drop to drink, mind you . . . "

"Oh, stellar damnation," the skipper of the Hazard moaned. He swigged down his drink, set it down, and hastily grabbed two more from the robot tray. *This gabby bucket of bolts could talk the visor off a Ysss,* he thought, glaring at Ween Leever, who bowed to him before he left to join a crowd of well-wishers. As the robot blabbered on, Rian gave it a sickly smile and looked around for the nearest escape-hatch. Before he walked away, Garthane indulged in the slight indiscretion of reading the pirate's next thoughts, which were as follows:

Now I know what hell is: being in a room without

doors, tied to a chair, forced to listen to this blithering mechanoid for all eternity.

Finally, at the end of his tether after several long minutes of courteous attention and frantic scanning, Rian distracted the robot by pointing out a potential victim, and made his escape, scurrrying over to Ween Leever's side. Frowning like a storm on a summer horizon, the pirate waited for Ween, who was just taking something out of his personal locker, to turn around.

"You sneaky little turd." Rian glared as the techhead turned his way. "You thumb-headed little twink. I ought to part your hair with a laser-beam for that."

"Now, skipper," Ween replied, shutting the locker behind him, "you *know* how fond Ovie is of you. Besides, I told him how you made it up with Al and D-Ana, and now he hopes you might think of promoting him."

"I'll promote him," Red Rian snarled. "Right up the nearest torpedo tube! "Say, what's that?" The pirate pointed to the framed holo-image Ween held in his hands. Ween held it up for Rian to see. There, in three dimensions and the colors of life, stood a man (no longer young) with flaring white hair, bulbous nose, and an enormous belly that was supported by two spindly legs. The figure struck a jaunty pose and wore the tights and doublet of Ween's homeworld, Greeb. Rian thought the man was the funniest-looking humanoid he'd ever set eyes on.

"He looks like a planet on toothpicks," the pirate said, just before he was shaken by a wave of uncontrollable laughter. "Who," he wheezed, once he was able to stop laughing, "is that silly man?"

Ween glared at him sourly. "For your information, Rian, that happens to be my beloved uncle." By this time, Nila, Dann, Purpur, Garthane and several of the Taylians had gathered around them, drawn by the mag-

net of the redbeard's merriment.

"Your . . . uncle?" Rian repeated, still gasping for breath. "That man is your . . . uncle?" He asked again, backing away as his chest began to heave.

"Yes," Ween snapped. "What of it?"

"*Yaa-haahaahaahaa-aaa-aaa*!" was Rian's only reply. Screaming with laughter, the star-pirate lurched out of the workshop. His demented cackling startled the skeleton-crew on duty above-decks, and awakened their relief, who were sleeping aft.

The others all took a good look at the holo-image . . . and did their best to keep from laughing. All except Garthane. The High Master stared at the image for several seconds; then his eyes rolled up in his head, and he stood immobile before Ween and his companions, scarcely breathing.

"What made you take out that holo-image?" Garthane asked, when he came out of his brief trance.

Ween looked down at the thing, and then back up at Garthane. "I don't know," he said, scratching his head. "I just got an urge to take it out."

Garthane studied him. "You obviously have great extrasensory powers, Ween. Because I just received a communication from the Fellowship . . . and it told me that your uncle was on his way to Aurea Solis."

"Well," exclaimed the side-eyed Ween, "how do you like that for a birthday present?"

When the Hazard touched-down on Aurea Solis, Garthane went directly to Libera's great hall, along with the rest of the Hazard's crew and passengers, and coordinated the Fellowship's strategies with those of the League of Free Worlds. Since the defeat of the star-armada, Garthane's plans were unanimously accepted as a rule, and that night was no exception.

"To sum up, ladies and gentlemen of the League," the High Master said, scanning the assembly with a serene stare, "I shall repeat the essentials of the joint-strategy we have agreed upon.

"One: Even though Primula has been saved and the occupied worlds liberated, this is only a temporary condition. Ylang's forces will return, one day. I'm sure you're all aware of this. Therefore, the Primula galaxy, one of the richest and most prosperous star-seas in the known universe, must continue to devote all its available resources to the preparation for the coming struggle. Last time, we rose to the great challenge in a few scant months; to prepare ourselves for the next encounter, we have the luxury of time—a year, perhaps two. Ylang's forces are deployed over the length and breadth of its vast empire, and the Dark Emperor will not risk intergalactic rebellion by massing his starfleets and armies to confront us at present."

He gave the audience a sad smile. "It is indeed a pity to expend the resources of this galaxy in war-production, but that is what we must do. And if we are fortunate enough to ransom our future again, better days will come.

"Two: The Fellowship's recruiting goes well, better than I had hoped." He leaned forward, raised an eyebrow, and nodded his head slowly at the assembly. "The souls of my fellow-Primulans are not so flabby as I had thought." A wave of laughter rolled in from the audience. "The Era of the Great Peace, long may it be remembered, has kept you all well and strong," he continued. "You have supplied many worthy initiates to the guardian order of your home galaxy. With the help of the Infinite, its spiritual strength and collective powers of mind will be hugely increased the next time we engage in a life-and-death struggle with Ylang-

Ylang."

The audience cheered and applauded loudly.

"Three: We are proceeding immediately to outline a strategy whereby we may commence the liberation of our nearest neighbors in the Taylos galaxy. I would remind you that we owe much to the Taylians, as represented by Captain Rian and his admirable crew."

The audience cheered and applauded again, Red Rian and the crew of the Hazard the loudest of all.

"Four: After proceeding with the implementation of the above-mentioned projects, the combined forces of the League and the Fellowship will also consider it their duty to engage and crush any enemy vessels or starfleets of reasonable size that they might happen to encounter, and to spread the message of resistance and rebellion as far as it is in their power to do so."

All the people in the great hall got to their feet and cheered wildly for several minutes. When the uproar had finally subsided, Garthane stretched out his arms and blessed the assembly. "Infinity is at the heart of all things," he said. "All things are one."

A hush fell over the crowd as Garthane left the speaker's dais. Red Rian, sitting with Nila and Dann in the midst of his crew, leaned over to nudge Ween and whisper out of the side of his mouth. "This is as good a reason as a man can ever find to tie one on. If you so much as open your mouth about how I've been drinking when I stagger back to quarters tonight, I'm gonna have you welded into that blasted locker of yours, where you'll spend the rest of eternity with that holo-image of your funny-looking uncle." Before Ween could open his mouth to reply, the buccaneer stood up and left.

Dann heard Ween sigh. As he turned to look at him, the boy-genius spoke in a low voice. "Y'know something?" he asked rhetorically. "My uncle is kinda

funny-looking." Dann had to smile as Ween added, "But don't you dare tell Rian I said so."

After the celebration had ended, Rian, somewhat drunk and inclining to the sentimental, staggered over to the spaceport, intending to gaze at the good ship Hazard in the moonlight. "There's m'baby," he said, when he saw the bright-plated craft gleaming in the distance, and lurched past the smiling guards at the main gate. But Red Rian never reached the Hazard. Half-way out to his ship, he stopped to gawk at the strangest sight ever seen in Libera, capital city of Aurea Solis: an enormous starship—an empire cruiser, in fact—escorted by four League destroyers, was in the act of touching down on the free soil of the center of galactic resistance.

"What in the name of the Red Dwarf is that?" Rian soliloquized, as he stumbled in the direction of the great black vessel.

There was an extraordinarily heavy guard at the launch-pad, but the security officer waved the hero of Primula through without a second thought. Blinking his eyes, shaking his head and muttering to himself in disbelief, the star-pirate watched as the ground-crew rolled the flexiladder up to the side of the cruiser. He was already amazed, but his astonishment was multiplied by its square root when the ship's door swung open. There before him, posing flamboyantly in the hatchway, decked-out in scarlet cape, pointed shoes, forest-green doublet and tights, was the ridiculous man in the holo-image, that bulbous personage with legs like toothpicks . . . Ween Leever's uncle!

The chief security-officer saluted Rian as the strange man waddled down the flexiladder. "I may be drunk," Rian muttered to himself, "but I'm not *that* drunk." He

took a deep breath, walked up to the foot of the flexiladder, and stood face to face with the stranger.

"Peace and brotherhood to the brave souls of the august and multiplex Primula galaxy, from their brothers and sisters in the great star-fields of Taylos," the man said. He spoke in a voice that was located somewhere between a drawl and a whine. Taking off his tall, pointed hat, the man bowed with great difficulty, and puffed like a compressor when he straightened up. His gimlet eyes twinkled as he stood there beaming at the crowd and drumming with his fingers on the wide brim of his hat.

Red Rian was the first to speak. "I don' believe this," he said, leaning over and poking his sausage of an index finger into the protruding belly of the visitor.

"Unhand me, sir!" the stranger yowled at Rian. "I warn you, I have killed men twice as good as yourself for half the provocation." As his eyes glittered with annoyance, his hose began to twitch with curiosity. "What is this strange thing I smell upon the red-bearded gentleman's breath? Why, it's the unforgettable odor of spiritous liquor! How strange, how remarkable. Who knows, sir . . . if you were to offer me a little nip, I might even be persuaded to spare your life."

Rian's eyes were locked-in on the huge mass of the man's red, swollen and vein-tracked nose. When he was finally able to look away from that awesome organ, he asked, "You're Ween's uncle, aren't you?"

"Bull'seye, m'boy!" the stranger replied." Vax Waxnax Leever, beloved uncle of Ween Nerdeen Leever, at your service."

As soon as the man pronounced his name, a name as unusual as his appearance, Rian broke out into howling laughter. "Ween who?" he asked, gritting his teeth and clutching his sides.

"Ween Nerdeen," the stranger replied, squinting suspiciously at the buccaneer. And when Rian exploded with the start of another chain-reaction of guffaws he straightened up, frowned, and said, "You're drunk, sir."

"That's right, sir. I am drunk," Rian replied, when he'd recovered from the seizure.

"Tell me one thing, sir," the fat man drawled, in that wheezy voice of his.

Rian cocked his head to one side and squinted at the man. "What's that, sir?"

Ween's uncle gave him a shifty smile. "Could you stand a little company, sir?"

Blorg was restless. He paced up and down nervously as the crews labored at the renovation of the huge vaults that were once the workshops of the ancient Mordlings. He had not been sleeping well since his dreams had changed. No longer were they full of images of murder and war; now, strange slithery forms predominated, coiling and uncoiling in the deep shadows of some dry and rocky place.

Even stranger than that was the fact that all his brother-reptiloids seemed to be affected in exactly the same way. None of them could remain still for more than a few moments; the black corridors of Kordoe resounded to their agitated hissing as they prowled the Forbidden City, caught in the grip of an all-consuming restlessness.

Blorg's thoughts drifted away from the arena of conquest, from the dark pleasures of violence and slaughter, for the first in years as he suddenly realized what was troubling the Ysss. One long cycle had just ended, another was just beginning; and the reptiloids felt this instinctually: the voice that sang in their cold blood was

urging them to return to the deserts of Sserp and mate with their own kind. *Of course!* Blorg thought. *It is time for the Ysss to multiply.*

The Devourer had been greatly amused by the frantic activities of the murderous reptiloids, and it bade them farewell with a certain reluctance. Still, boredom had been kept at bay for several months now, and Yland was more enthusiastic than it had been for aeons.

As Blorg strode toward the starship that was to take him to his homeworld, Ylang's thought went with him, slithering into the recesses of his mind. *Go, my son, and breed me strong little snakelets. And when you return, I will show you a wonder, a sight that has not been seen for long ages . . . a Mordling.*

4/ To Liberate A Galaxy

"Ween Nerdeen, where are you?" the skipper of the Hazard cooed, as he and Purpur entered the ship's workshop. The place was deserted, except for the presence of the roller-robot who was Ween's techno-companion. "All right, Ovie," Rian said, stepping directly into the robot's path, causing it to screech to a halt. "Where's the kid?"

The star-pirate's suspicions were aroused when the robot's only reply was a hissing stream of white noise. Since O-V-1 was incapable of lying, Ween must have given it the order to de-activate its talki-track, so as to keep his whereabouts secret. Purpur strode around the room, sniffing for Ween's scent. He stopped in front of a bank of wall-lockers, turned to his skipper, and pointed over his shoulder. Rian grinned broadly and tip-toed over to the locker Purpur had indicated. With a series of flourishes, he reached out, turned the handle and threw open the door. And there before him, huddled in the locker, the flush of embarrassment that colored his face giving him the appearance of a blond-haired beet, was Ween Leever.

"I don't mean to disturb your meditations," Rian said ironically. "But I've got to talk to you, Ween . . . Nerdeen."

Ween's face was so hot that he felt his blush must be

illuminating the insides of the locker. Now that Rian had discovered his middle name, the pirate was using it constantly, to Ween's great discomfort. On his homeworld, it was the custom to give the young of both sexes middle names that possessed a certain identity of sound with their first names. Uncle Vax had blabbed it to Rian on their first meeting and, drunk as he was, the buccaneer had remembered it. Now that the secret was known to him, it would be a long time before he let Ween off the hook. While perfectly normal on Greeb, the rhyming names caused most humanoids (the silliest of all galactic races, Ween thought as he stepped out of the shelter of the locker) to break up with laughter.

"What it is, Rian," he said tiredly, wincing at his tormentor's grin.

"I've come to talk to you about your uncle, Weenie-boy. Not only is the old gasbag guzzling all my booze and burying us under a heap of brango manure with his interminable tall-tales, but he's also skinning the crew at cards every night."

Up to his old tricks again, thought Ween. His eccentric uncle had always been a trial to the Leevers, what with his cockeyed schemes and genial larcenies. *There's one in every family*, the boy-genius thought, *but uncle Vax must be the equivalent of at least five or ten.*

"Sure," Ween replied. I'll speak to him . . . but only if you quit calling me Ween Nerdeen."

"You strike a hard bargain, laddie," the pirate said, grinning from ear to ear. "But it's a deal."

Then, just as Purpur grabbed him in the pulverizing grip he recognized as the felinoid's expression of affection, Ween heard a whiny drawl in the outside corridor.

"Ween Nerdeen," the voice said, "where are you, my boy?"

As his uncle's belly appeared in the doorway like a

planet entering a navi-screen, Rian said, "You're on, kid!" and raced to the door, Purpur following close behind him.

"Captain, Rian, estimable felinoid," Vax said by way of greeting, doffing his pointed hat with an oily smile. "I was just looking for some company. Perhaps you gentlemen would care to join me in a little game of chance?"

"Sorry, unk," the star-pirate replied as he and Purpur navigated the air-space between Vax's belly and the side of the hatch that led to the corridor. "Got to calibrate the ekto-wedges and defuse the glossom." With that bit of double-talk, the pirate and his first-mate escaped.

"Yas. Well, perhaps I might offer you a little drink, then—in your quarters, Captain?" Vax called out hastily. But the object of his attention had already dashed out of sight.

He turned to Ween. "Busy little devils, aren't they? Ah, nephew, perhaps you . . . ?"

"Uncle Vax Waxnax," Ween interrupted, a stern look on his face. "I want to talk to you."

"Your robot, perhaps?" Vax continued. "We played together only yesterday, you know." Hearing this, O-V-1 rolled hastily out of sight.

Ween's uncle put his hat down on a low stool that stood beside a workbench. He scanned the room in search of something to drink. "What is it, my boy?" he asked with a sigh, remembering his nephew's abstemious habits.

"I wish you'd be less . . . exhuberant," Ween said. "And quit gambling with the crew. You know what happens when you begin . . . " Ween started to sit down—right on his uncle's hat!

"No, my boy! Don't . . . "

Crunch! Ween shot to a standing position.

"Drat!" exclaimed his uncle, waddling over to the scene of the accident and reaching for his hat.

"Since when do hats crunch?" Ween asked, whipping the hat off the stool before his uncle could grab it. He thrust his hand inside and felt around for a moment, after which he yanked and pulled something out. "A surface-scanner," Ween said, as he looked down at the thin, metal disc in his palm. He held it out for Vax to see. "So you've been rigging the game again, eh?"

His uncle suddenly assumed an air of innocence that gave him the look of a perverted cherub. "Why, how did that get there?" he mumbled out of the side of his mouth. "Must have come with the hat."

Ween glared at him. "Yeah, I wonder, too," he replied sarcastically. "I want you to return all the money you won, uncle Vax."

"But Ween Nerdeen," the old rogue pleaded, "you wouldn't deprive your beloved uncle of his little nest-egg, would you, m'boy? Remember, I had to leave Greeb in a bit of a hurry. I . . . "

"Immediately!" Snapped his nephew. "Or would you prefer me to tell the crew why you're so lucky at cards?"

Vax frowned and fingered his bulb of a nose. "Oh, very well, my boy," he sighed. "It's a pity though. I had great hopes for you."

"What's a pity?" Ween asked.

"That you seem to be getting more like your aunt every day," his uncle wheezed plaintively.

Starships lifted-off from spaceports throughout the vast expanse of the Dark Empire, as the Ysss went back to Sserp. Ylang-Ylang, confident that the Primulans would not dare to leave the relative security of Taylos

or their own galaxy at present, permitted the greate part of his ruling elite to return to their homeworld. I was in the Devourer's interest, after all, for the new brood of reptiloids would provide the Ysss overlords o the future.

So the Dark Emperor, its pleasure in the great galac tic game restored, personally directed the restoration and the renovation of the Mordling facilities. Crews labored day and night under the all-seeying eye o Ylang's watchful mentality, working as if their lives depended on the swift completion of the immense proj ect . . . which indeed they did.

In the laboratories of the Forbidden City, nourished with infusions of protein, enzymes and amino acids specimens grew into the tissue-cultures that would soon metamorphose into the cloned shapes of the long-dead Mordlings. Ylang had imposed the mental and genetic imprints of its ancestors on these cultures in its efforts to replicate members of the mightiest and most evil species ever known in the stars, so that the giant ma chines, idle for aeons, might run once again.

Then we shall see, the Great Devourer thought, *what the powers of mind of the Fellowship of Light will be able to do against the dark science of my race. Soon I shall work wonders . . .*

Garthane thought he knew Vax Waxnax for what he was: a charming old liar and swindler. But he also appreciated the man's talents. It wasn't every day one could fool the Ysss themselves, and con them into thinking one had converted a group of conquered and oppressed men into the first willing soldiers of the Dark Empire ever to come out of the Taylos galaxy: and what's more, con them again, eventually obtaining their permission to man the first volunteer ship from the

captive star-sea. Acute but of Ween's homeworld, Garthane had concluded; and Ween's uncle seemed to possess them to an extraordinary degree. To his surprise (and slight dismay), the High Master had not been able to fully enter into the old scoundrel's mind, a very unusual occurrence.

But at the same time, he had to laugh. The pot-bellied scalawag had set out in an imperial cruiser, the occasion being the volunteer crew's first shake-down cruise, and what had he done? Nothing less than to overpower the Ysss advisors, send the starship into hyperspace, and head straight for Aurea Solis—the heart of enemy resistance! In his own left-handed way, Ween's eccentric uncle was quite a man.

And he brought with him technical resources of great value, for he and his fellow-Greebans all shared the mechanical ingenuity so common among the natives of their homeworld. The fat old rascal had even supplied the missing step in Garthane's plans for the liberation of Taylos. When he learned of the scrambler, his newphew's brilliant invention that had permitted the Hazard to penetrate the air space of Flaigon itself, Vax Wasnax' huge jowls danced to the music of his excitement.

"Probes, Master Garthane—probes!" he exclaimed. "Yas. That's what's needed to provoke unrest among the subject peoples of Taylos. That's the way to plant the seeds of rebellion."

"Please explain yourself further, Vax Waxnax Leever."

"Certainly, your reverence," Vax said, cradling his belly in his arms as tenderly as a new mother holds her first-born. "We dispatch probes to Taylos and other galaxies as well, sir. Electronically-controlled drones—small, unmanned vessels fitted-out with

scramblers and transmitters that are programmed, of course, to broadcast the word of liberation and the news of your victory over the armada. They could enter the atmospheres of the occupied world undetected and, overriding the empire's frequencies, spread your propaganda."

"That is an absolutely brilliant idea, sir," Garthane said, much impressed by Vax's words.

"A trifle, sir," the Greeban replied. "A mere bagatelle. As Ween has probably told your eminence, genius runs in the family."

Ween was impressed as well: Uncle Vax had redeemed himself! His larcenous relation's words had just elevated the man to the status of galactic hero. "Come on, unk," Ween said, "I'm gonna buy you a drink."

"Or two?" Vax Wasnax added hopefully.

"Or two," his nephew replied, as they bowed to Garthane before leaving the room.

"That's my dear nephew," Vax said, "My beloved Ween Nerdeen."

"Will you *please* stop calling me that!" Garthane heard Ween growl before they were out of earshot. He went to his desk, sat down, and drafted a memo to all League tech-dromes, ordering the construction of the probes immediately, as a top-priority. He decided to put Ween and his uncle in charge of the project.

Garthane smiled serenely. He had just witnessed a very satisfying demonstration of the multiplicity of our natures. *Never underestimate anyone,* he thought, *not even an old sinner like Vax Waxnax.*

Sserp was a desolate place, a world that most creatures would consider cruel and inhospitable, but Blorg was at home on it. He stripped off his body-armor and

felt the scorching heat of the desert caress his scaly body. Staring into the distance, he made out the mating-caves; the stones at their mouths glared back with the reflected light of the planet's intense sun, their shapes wavering in the distorting heat.

The mating-cycles of the Ysss were spaced far apart, and it had been a long time since Blorg had stood on the surface of his homeworld. He looked behind him, and saw scores of his brother-reptiloids shedding the black skins of their body-armor. A cold, hissing music rose in his mind: the mating-song of the female Ysss.

Haaass! Haaass! Blorg inhaled the scorching air of Sserp and felt revitalized; his scaly frame quivered to the promptings of his ophidian nature. *Seek me, find me, coil with me,* the serpent-voices sang in his head, *and we will lurk and slither in the shadows, dancing among the stones as we offer prayers to the god of death. Light the caves with the beams of your eyes, and find the one who waits for you. Come unto me, give me the serpent's kiss, take me . . . and we shall breed the children of darkness. Leave the furnace of the desert, and take your pleasure among the damp and shadowy stones of the caves of Ofiidiia.*

Excited by the promise of the serpentine love-song, Blorg drew himself up to his full height: his four arms stretched over his head, reaching for the skies, hands clawing blindly at the blazing sun. A wild cry rang out in his midnight soul; his glands transmitted a frantic chemical message that made his blood boil. A fierce joy shook the reptiloid, causing him to shiver despite the intense heat that enveloped his body. He lowered the level of his consciousness and surrendered to the imperatives of instinct.

Blorg raised an arm and gave the signal to advance. He strode off over the fiery sands, waving his four arms

and breaking into a run a moment later. A thousand Ysss ran behind him, their scales gleaming in the sun like the shields of an invading army. They had come home!

Rian paced the terrace of Nila's quarters like a big red cat, the hairs on the nape of his neck tingling with the electricity of his desire.

"What's the matter, Rian?" Nila asked. "You're certainly in a restless mood tonight."

He stopped pacing when he reaced the spot where Nila leaned, looking out at the stars. He turned to her, picked up his drink from the railing, and drained it in one gulp. "It's being out here in the moonlight with you, babe," he replied, studying the way the silver light edged her profile. "Brings out the animal in me." He thought she smiled, but wasn't sure. It was torture for him to be alone with her, but one he gladly suffered. And it got harder to take every day . . .

One day she favors the kid, he thought, *and the next she looks at me as if I were swellest present she'd ever received in her entire life. Damn it! I wish she'd make up her mind. She's making me old before my time, causing me to moon over her like some moonstruck little adolescent twerp. I can't take this much longer. It's horrible . . . even worse than having to listen to that old gasbag, Vax Waxnax.*

"Nila honey," he said plaintively, "my nerves are shot from all this blasted waiting. What am I gonna do?"

She straightened up and turned to face him, looking, he thought, like the moon-goddess of some primitive civilization. "Have another drink," she said mischievously.

She looked so different to him at times like this. Gold

and copper were her daytime colors, but the moonlight lent her another aspect, frosting her bright hair with its cool, silver glow. He could never make up his mind as to which way he liked her best. And he was sure he'd like her equally well in the darkness, too.

"I gather you haven't come to a decision yet," he said, sighing as he poured another glass of nenegol.

"I've been awfully busy lately," Nila answered, her apologetic smile turning his brain to jelly. "And I guess I've been . . . ducking it."

Rian took her in his arms. "Work on it, will ya?"

"I will," she said, closing her eyes as he drew her body against his. "Just be patient a little longer."

As he kissed her, Rian smelled the fragrance of her hair and thought of green, flowering gardens at the dawn of creation.

"Damn it, sir," Vax Waxnax snarled in his scratchy, nasal drawl, "I told you never to do that to me again!"

Ween's uncle was peeved. O-V-1 had just deactivated itself for the second time that day. This tactic had proved to be the robot's most effective defense-shelter against the overwhelming tidal wave of Uncle Vax's long-winded anecdotes.

"Think you're smart, don't you, you clanging bag of bolts," Vax muttered, as he waddled off. "Better hope I'm not around the next time you're due to be lubed, because I'll bury you in rancid cooking fat."

As he rumbled through the hatch, drawn by the momentum of his huge belly, the door to one of the workshop's lockers opened, and out stepped Dann Oryzon. He turned to the door on his left, and rapped on it with his knuckles. That door creaked open slowly, and Ween Leever's frizzy head appeared from behind it. "He's gone, is he?" the boy-genius asked.

Dan nodded. "Want me to re-activate Ovie?" he asked, pointing to Ween's immobile techno-companion. Ween winced. "No. Not yet, Dann. The champion windbag of two galaxies just left, and I'm in no shape to take on the contender. Uh, what were you saying before uncle Vax came in?"

"They're launching your probes this afternoon," the young Aqauean replied, "all five thousand of 'em. And they're gonna have a little celebration afterwards, at League H.Q."

"Will my uncle be there?"

"Sure he will. The party's in his honor as well as yours."

"Then I'm not going."

Dann smiled mischievously. "Come on, Ween . . . Nerdeen."

"Don't call me that!"

"I won't . . . if you come to the party."

"All right—you blackmailer," Ween snapped. "But you've got to do something for me."

"Sure," his friend replied. "What?"

"Warn me whenever uncle Vax gets close .. and cover my escape."

Garthane was pleased. The first wave of probes had been launched, and all lifted-off without a single misfire. And now they were on their way to the occupied worlds of several galaxies, where they would penetrate their respective atmospheres and broadcast the League's message of resistance and freedom.

He felt the working of the dark heart of the Infinite, its cosmic vibrations stirring something deep within him as the nature of created things flowed in search of equilibrium. The perfect launching had been a sign, he felt, an omen of things to come. And soon the liberation of

Taylos would begin . . .

Snakes in broods, fires and floods, carnage and destruction, Ylang sang, its thoughts filling the lair with the demented music of its tenebrous merriment. *Dark things lurk, and evil works its dark-designed obstruction.*

The emperor had not been so excited for millennia. The dark vaults that housed the workshops and laboratories of its demonic ancestors were now restored and put to their original use, the service of evil. And Ylang's darling, Blorg, was returning home after the mating-rites and the serpentine dance of awakened sexuality on the scorching surface of his homeworld. And soon the creatures designed to operate the giant and intricate machines would awaken.

Enter the vault, sweet Blorg, Ylang urged as soon as its pet had returned, the fires of its expectation casting a flickering orange glow over the throne room's stone floors. *And look upon the beauty of the Mordlings.*

As my lord commands, so does his servant obey. Blorg nodded to the anxious group of his brother-Ysss who stood gathered before the cyclopean doors at the entrance to the Mordling laboratories. The reptiloids leaned on the doors and pushed with all their strength, causing them to groan like voices in a musician's nightmare, turning inward as they did.

Enter and look upon the noblest works of all creation, my hissing little beauties. Go within, and see Ylang's people reincarnate by virtue of its black arts!

Their body-armor clanking as they massed together, the Ysss filed into the laboratories. *Haaa-aa-aaass! Haa-aass! Haaass!* The vaults rang with the sounds of their astonished gasps, as the reptiloids beheld the huge forms that floated in the nutrient-solutions of the large and growth-lighted transparent tanks.

So this is a Moordling, Blorg thought, so alarmed by the sight that he momentarily ignored the hovering oppressive presence of the Devourer's consciousness. *How terrible they are . . . even in repose.*

And the Mordlings were monstrous, even to a monster such as Blorg. Gigantic beings thirty to forty feet tall, their scaly hides shone with all the colors of a rainbow of corruption. The green of decay, the red of outrage, the brown of rot, the yellow of ancient desolation and the oily black of absolute evil glittered in alternations as the light played over the gross forms that rocked gently in the tanks.

Their limbs looked as thick and powerful as the trunk of the tree of original evil; their hands were great claws, designed to tear and throttle; their faces were as hard and cold as the surface of their homeworld, Flaigon, and their gaping, stiletto-toothed mouths yawned like the entrance to hell.

Ylang felt the fear and revulsion of the Ysss and savored it, drinking deeply of the energies liberated by their first sight of the Mordlings. But the Devourer was not offended; after all, the Ysss are connoisseurs of death, not beauty. And in the solar furnace of its heart, Ylang knew that the Mordlings were the most deadly creatures ever spawned in the long history of the universe.

Watch now, Ylang-Ylang commanded, bringing Blorg out of the shock-induced trance he had entered along with his fellows. *I shall show you a wonder.* The reptiloid lord felt the star-tyrant's thoughts withdraw and flow elsewhere. He gazed expectantly at the nearest tank.

Suddenly the mighty form within stirred, thrashing its huge limbs and sending a wave of fluid over the side of the tank. And then, clutching at the sides of the con-

tainer, the thing hauled itself erect and glared balefully down at the Ysss, twin beams of light flaring from eyes that were as black as the dead heart of Flaigon. And when it opened its horrendous mouth and roared in a voice colored with overtones of rage and madness, the Ysss, led by Blorg the Devastator, fled from the vault as fast as their powerful legs would carry them.

Ah-hah-hah-hah-hahahahaha-a-a-aaa! Ylang's laughter shook the black planet to its core. The fleeing Ysss were thrown to the ground as boulders crashed and ricocheted along the corridors of Kordoe; terror filled the Forbidden City.

Rest yourselves, my sweetlings, Ylang boomed, after its mirth had subsided. *Retire to your thermo-couches and dream dark dreams . . . And tomorrow, you shall witness the marvelous science of the Mordlings at work.*

In this fashion, Ylang-Ylang set to work. And time passed, hours stretching into days, days stretching into weeks, and weeks stretching into months.

Others were busy as well: the Fellowship of Light was training its members-to-be, and the League of Free Worlds was preparing for war, readying its forces as it approached the next undertaking in the great galactic game . . . the liberation of the Taylos galaxy.

5 / Lord Blorg's Raid

The peoples of Taylos had no love for their black-uniformed conquerors, and the message of the League's probes was not lost on them. Once the starfleets of the liberators entered their galaxy, the Taylians rose up in great numbers on many worlds and did everything they could to make things uncomfortable for the Dark Empire's forces on the ground.

Enemy starfleets were on hand to resist those of the League, but this time they were not favored with anything that even remotely resembled the overwhelming numerical superiority of the late armada; the star-pilots trained by Rian and his crew were now combat-veterans, and they won victory after victory as they penetrated deeper into Taylos.

Of all the encounters in that galactic struggle, the greatest was the Battle of Yahwoo, so named because Purpur's homeworld planet was the nearest to the combat-zone. Sliith, High Admiral of the occupying spacenavy, stung by the successive defeats of his individual starfleets, had given the order to consolidate all available forces in Yahwoo's sector of the galaxy, thereby intending to crush the enemy once and for all.

Sliith entered the battle confident in the strength of his forces, which outnumbered the Primulan vessels by a ratio of five-to-one. But he had not reckoned with the

Fellowship of Light. Using their powers of mind once again, one hundred members of the order (half its present strength), boarded various ships of the League's starfleets and went among the enemy. And once again, they entered the trance-state of spiritual communion known as a mind-lock and drew on the energies of the dark heart of the universe, causing the black starships that opposed them to be shaken and torn apart by the terrible energies thus unleashed. As the mighty dark armada had been destroyed, so was Admiral Sliith's lesser force; and few survivors returned to Flaigon to tell the tale.

The Battle of Yahwoo broke the back of enemy opposition in Taylos; shortly thereafter, Sliith's successor gave the order to evacuate all Dark Empire forces from the galaxy. But even the evacuation proved to be a disaster, for the Taylians, without waiting for the liberators to land on the surface of their planets, rose up and stormed the bases of the occupiers, seizing great numbers of starships and weapons, and slaughtering as many of the enemy as they possibly could. Then, as the League forces arrived, the huge black vessels were repainted in the colors of the liberated worlds and enrolled as the first units of the reborn Taylian spacenavies.

Less than fifteen months (by the intergalactic standard) had gone by since the defeat of the star-armada; the Primulans and their allies were intoxicated by the heady wine of victory. Unwilling to lose the momentum of their success, they began to plot the liberation of Havanal, the galaxy nearest to Taylos. Again probes were sent out, to Havanal and galaxies beyond, and the tech-dromes and shipyards of the allies hummed with activity and rang to the sweet music of resistance and liberation. At a great banquet on Yahwoo, Garthane

addressed the allied commanders and voiced the first sobering thought of the day: before long, Ylang-Ylang would surely make its next move.

Yowls and meows, scrowls and r-r-rows: Rian thought it was the most unique victory celebration he had ever seen. As the League's forces marched on the springy surface of the central boulevard of Meee, capital city of Yahwoo, the cat-flock lined the streets and cheered like a veterinarian's dream of glory.

I'd hate to be a dog today, the star-pirate thought, waving and beaming down at the felinoid multitudes from the height of Purpur's shoulders. Rian was getting used to this business of being a galactic hero, and he had to admit he liked it. Folks were most respectful in the presence of a hero. Why, they'd swallow even the most outrageous of yarns and then come up gasping with excitement, begging for more of the same. Banquets were another benefit: when you weren't fighting, you were usually stuffing your craw with the finest delicacies the host-world had to offer. And the hot, inviting looks the women shot at him . . . it was almost enough to make him regret his decision to be faithful to Nila.

Only one thing made the skipper of the Hazard's day less than perfect, and that was the presence of his fellow-hero, that red-nosed gasbag, that Father of Lies, that dirty old man—Vax Waxnax.

"Yas. Yas." the old rum-pot wheezed, fluttering his fingers at the crowd and staring around his overripe fruit of a nose. "Scratch for joy, my little kittikins," Vax intoned through the side of his mouth, "for we bring you the nibbles of liberation."

Bouncing their riders as they hit a rough spot in the fibroid pavement, the felinoids galloped to steady themselves. *Oh, you poor tabby*! Rian thought, as he

glanced over to the catman who bore Vax and his distended belly. *One more stretch of road like this one, and that bag of guts'll beat you to death*! He leaned over and spoke into Purpur's ear. "See that? If you get out of line while we're here, I'm going to see to it personally that you get to carry old balloon-belly back to the Hazard." By way of reply, Purpur shuddered and yowled.

What bothered the skipper of the Hazard was the fact that Ween's conniving uncle was beside him in the limelight. Comparisons may be odious, but Rian, although he never admitted it to himself or anyone else, had a deep-seated fear that he would wind up resembling the old buffoon in his own later years. The feeling wasn't quite rational; but in some way, the old Greeban held up a mirror to the more exaggerated side of the pirate's nature. Even heroes sometimes see themselves as clowns.

R-r-r-ro-ooow! They encountered another bumpy section of the boulevard and the cat-man, bludgeoned repeatedly by the merciless bulk of Vax's belly, yowled his discomfort. "Easy, m'boy! Easy!" Vax exclaimed between boozy belches, the jogging of the felinoid turning his stomach into a cocktail shaker. "Is this any way to treat a hero?"

Giddy-up, tabby! Rian thought, shaking with laughter as he turned away from the sight of Ween's uncle's discomfort and whispered into his first-mate's furry, pointed ear. "I'll give you five-to-one they hospitalize that pussycat by the time the parade's over." He pointed to the cat-man who carried Vax. The poor felinoid's head was bent down almost to his chest, the sinews of his neck stretched to their limits by the aggressiveness of the enormous belly they buttressed. "I'll bet," Red Rian whispered again, "that your pal over there goes on sick-call when it's time to see us

off."

Lord Blorg quietly made his way along the aisle of the workshop, casting nervous glances left and right at the monstrous things that operated the towering machines. The Mordling clones were so horrible that even the Yass felt uncomfortable in their presence; they were so fearsome that Blorg was continually thankful the Dark Emperor had created them devoid of the evil ingenuity and motivation characteristic of their prototypes. Ylang had cloned them solely to operate the great machines, and that was all they did, eating and sleeping only when sheer hunger and fatigue overtook them. Still, Blorg shuddered when he considered the awful games those beauties might have been capable of dreaming up, had they the mentality and the imagination.

With a sigh of relief, the lord of the Ysss left the workshop and turned down the long corridor that led to the lair. A chill wind blew through the chambers of his mind as the tyrant's thoughts made themselves felt.

My son is disturbed, Ylang noted cheerfully. *What bothers him*?

My lord, the Taylos galaxy has just been liberated by those upstarts from Primula. And my agents there inform me that the League of Free Worlds plans to move against us in Havanal.

What of it? the Great Devourer asked, upsetting Blorg with its gleeful insouciance.

Great Ylang, if their progress is not checked swiftly, word of their victories will reach the subject galaxies. Then rebellion will spread through the stars like atomic-fire.

My son must not worry, the emperor purred. *We shall stop them before they ever enter Havanal.*

And how will my master accomplish this?

Enter the lair, sweet Blorg, and you shall see.

Blorg shielded his eyes as he entered, and looked away from the debased radiance of his master. In the center of the vast stone chamber, he saw three of his brother-reptiloids seated at the controls of a strange console. The thing was scaled-down to their size, but obviously the product of Mordling skills. On a line with this device, but thirty yards to its left, there stood a massive laser-cannon, one that belonged aboard an imperial cruiser. It was manned by two more reptiloids, and was trained on a cowering pack of insectoid slaves who huddled in the exact center of the lair. Another group of insectoids huddled in a circle near the wall behind the laser-cannon, guarded by a platoon of humanoid soldiers. And by the adjoining wall, a group of Ysss stood watching the entire scene.

Ylang will now be pleased to demonstrate the fruit of Mordling technical expertise, the Devourer announced. *The cannoneers have their weapon trained on the group of worthless insectoids you see before you. Behold what happens when the laser fires.*

Vvvv-w-whaaa! Urged on by Ylang's will, the cannoneers fired. A blinding red flash illuminated the lair as the laserbeam hit its target. When the smoke had cleared, nothing remained of the insectoids but a few charred flakes that drifted lazily to the floor. They had all been vaporized.

Bzzzzz-z-z-zzz! Dit-a-dit! Dit-a-dit! The insectoids in the remaining group buzzed and chittered with fear when they saw what had happened to their counterparts. The guards activated their stingers, lashing the prisoners into silence with the small hand-rays.

Bring forth the second group! ordered Ylang. On this command, the guards herded the slaves over to the target area, backing away as soon as the insectoids were

assembled.

Ylang thundered and lightninged in anticipation of what was to come. *Now, my lords, we shall see this little demonstration repeated . . . but with one difference. Activate the console.*

The Ysss in the center nodded to his fellows, and they set to work, coordinating their efforts telepathically. Lights flickered on and off in complex sequences as the console hummed softly into activation.

Now fix your sights on those wretches before you, Ylang ordered.

Blorg noticed that a small turret mounted on top of the console began to swing around, training what appeared to be a large, circular lens projecting out of its center on the cowering insectoids. He wondered what connection this device would have with the execution of the slaves.

Adjust range, and project when on target, was the Dark Emperor's next instruction.

The Ysss at the console nodded again. *Ummmvwoo-o-o-ooot!* With a drone and a whine, a ghostly silver light came out of the lens. Its beam split about ten feet in front of the insectoids and immediately encircled them, joining again at the rear of the huddled group.

Activate laser-cannon! Ylang ordered.

Vvvv-w-w-whaaa! Again the powerful beam lanced out, filling the lair with its red light and scorching heat. But this time nothing happened. Blorg was astounded: the insectoids were still there—unvaporized!

The lair shook with Ylang's laughter, as the star-tyrant sampled the consternation of the Ysss. The reptiloid lords were all dumbfounded by what they had just seen.

Blorg was the first to comment upon the demonstration: *Father Ylang, if such a device were installed*

within your starships, they would be rendered impervious to the firepower of the League's vessels.

Not only that, Ylang replied, *but when enough of these machines are put on an interlock, the field thereby generated would render the ships within it impervious even to the powers of mind of the Fellowship of Light.*

If my lord will grant me the privilege of having the first unit installed in my new starship, the Scourge, I would be honored to test it in actual combat.

It will take some time to outfit several starfleets with this new invention, Lord Blorg.

All I require is one, great Ylang. That will prove sufficient for my purpose.

And how does my son propose to test this thing?

By shooting down the Hazard, and sending Rian and all his Taylian scum to hell!

Would my lord risk an encounter with the League's starfleets at this time?

That will not be necessary, great Ylang. My Taylian agents keep me well-informed of Rian's comings and goings. One day I shall swoop down on him when he least expects it, and settle his account for good.

Splendid, my sweet Blorg! Splendid! Yours shall be the first field-generator to be installed, the Devourer replied, flashing and booming in his glee like an electrical storm. *We are almost ready to make our next move in the great galactic game . . .*

Nila inserted another vibro-chip into the music-inducer and walked out on the balcony to watch the mellow sunset of Yahwoo. It was her last night on the garden-world of Purpur's kind; she and her companions were needed back in Primula. Rian would accompany her to League H.Q., where the preparations for the invasion of Havanal were being finalized; and Dann was

returning to Palos, where he would participate in the Fellowship's first mass-initiation ceremony in well over two hundred years.

Both Dann and the star-pirate took the opportunity to press for a decision, but Nila still couldn't bring herself to choose between them. But she did make a solemn promise: after the invasion of Havanal had been successfully launched, she would make up her mind, once and for all.

After speaking to Garthane about her feelings toward the two men, Nila had gone to one of the sanctuaries of the catfolk and spent the afternoon in meditation. She came out refreshed, trusting to the guidance and wisdom of her inner self. And in a sudden moment of clarity, an instant of profound insight, the lady from the golden planet realized she was on her way to making a decision. Reliving the events of her relationship to Dann and Rian in a flash, Nila was able to look deep into her heart and understand her feelings. She realized that she was beginning to favor one of her suitors over the other.

Nila smiled back at the sunset. So the conflict that had torn her apart for well over a year was coming to an end. Feelings of relief, surprise and certainty were mingled in this revelation. The long-awaited decision would soon be made. And the man she chose as her lover would probably be . . .

A gently meow interrupted her thoughts. Nila turned around and saw a figure silhouetted in the doorway. It was Maowl, Purpur's sweetheart, come to fetch her to the farewell banquet. They embraced; Nila hugged the towering cat-woman affectionately, while Maowl purred and licked her cheek.

"Oh, Maowl," Nila said, stepping back to admire her visitor, "that's such a pretty toga you're wearing." The

felinoid purred louder as a result of this compliment. "Rian tells me that Purpur missed you very much while he was away. Did you miss him, too?"

Maowl nodded, her green eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

"And now, he's got to leave again," Nila told her.

The love of Purpur's life emitted a sad little yowl.

"But don't worry," Nila said, linking arms with the graceful felinoid as they went back into the apartment. "He'll be back before you know it. Right after the liberation of Havanal begins. And you're going to be with him tonight, aren't you?"

The felinoid nodded.

"So make it a night to remember," Nila said with a wink.

By the time they left Nila's quarters, Maowl was purring again.

"I will return to Palos as soon as my business here is finished," Garthane told his son. "Make sure that all is in readiness for the great ceremony." Dann nodded and went up the Hazard's flexiladder.

The High Master waved goodbye to his son, and turned to survey the crowd that cheered as the galactic heroes boarded the bright-plated ship. Behind Ween Leever, who was lecturing his uncle on how to behave in his absence, Garthane watched Ven Fenben, the thin, intense man who was Vax's second-in-command, detach himself from the Greeban contingent and walk around to the far side of the Hazard, studying the craft.

A most interesting people, thought Garthane. The highly-evolved Greebans displayed the most extraordinary technical skills and abilities, and were the possessors of a restless intelligence that drove them to seek to understand anything they weren't already familiar

with. Their latent powers of mind seemed to be of a much higher potential than those of any other race Garthane had encountered in either Primula or Taylos.

Noticing the presence of this phenomenon in both Ween and his uncle, the High Master corroborated his findings when he attempted to enter the minds of Ven and several of the other Greebans. Garthane found himself unable to penetrate to any great depth; amazing as it seemed, Ween's people had the ability to screen their thoughts. *The Greebans would prove a great asset to the Fellowship,* he thought. *I must consult the members of our order, and ask them whether or not we should recruit initiates from Taylos.*

Garthane's thoughts turned back to the Hazard, as a speaker-voice ordered the crowd to clear the launching-pad. His son was off on another voyage. But this one, in contrast to the others Dann had taken since he left his homeworld, would surely be quiet and uneventful . . .

"Tracer signal from the Hazard received, my lord," a voice blared over the intercom of the dark starship. Seated in the pilot's chair of the Scourge, Blorg nodded slowly and began to punch the keys of the control-console before him. As the vessel's short-range scanners activated, the blip that traced the Hazard's progress appeared on the navi-screens.

Take her out on a sixty-eight degree heading, accelerating to cruising speed, Blorg thought, transmitting his instructions to the Ysss who sat beside him.

Sixty-eight and accelerating, came the telepathic reply.

Blorg switched on the ship's intercom, and transmitted his thoughts to its crew. *Stations, all hands. Prepare to intercept and engage enemy vessel. Activate*

lasers.

Haaass! Haaass! His scales tingled as he anticipated the encounter with the blip on the screens that represented the starship carrying his greatest enemies. This would be as easy as strangling a baby. The preliminary tests had been a total success; the Scourge was now impervious to both laser and proton-torpedo fire. And powers of mind were not a consideration, since that old fool in the purple cowl, Garthane, was not on board the bright ship. But everyone esle was: Nila, Dann Oryzon, the cat-thing, the full crew, and Red Rian . . . especially Red Rian. Blorg had lain in wait outside Yahwoo's atmosphere for two full days, his lone starship undetected where a squadron would have been blasted to its component atoms, waiting with reptilian patience to take his revenge.

"We have just left Yahwoo's atmosphere," a computer-voice droned, "and are proceeding on a one-niner-one heading."

"Prepare to accelerate to hyperspace entry speed," Red Rian ordered. "Two minutes to count-down."

The intercom crackled. "Skipper," the com-spec said, as a blip appeared on the navi-screen, "I'm receiving a signal on the general com-frequency band."

"Pipe it over, sparks," Rian replied, studying the blip's heading. "I don't know whose ship it is," he said to Purpur, "but it's gonna intersect our heading."

A *whoosh* of white noise, followed by a series of *bloops*, came from the Hazard's speakers as the signal was rectified. After that came the transmission: *Captain of the Hazard, do you read me? Acknowledge.*

Rian switched on the transmitter. "Read you loud and clear. Identify yourself, and state your purpose." The blip on the screen grew larger.

Greetings to Red Rian and his Taylian garbage, to Dann Oryzon and the lady Nila, from the commander of the imperial man-o'-war, Scourge. My mission is to destroy the Hazard and all on board her.

Amused, Rian smiled. After he gave the order to turn and prepare to engage the enemy, the star-pirate spoke into the transmitter's mike again. "Captain of the Scourge, it isn't empire practice to engage the enemy one-on-one. You are to be simultaneously complimented on your daring and reproached for your apparent lack of good sense. Do me the courtesy of supplying your name, sir . . . so I'll know just who it is I'm sending to hell."

It's an old friend of yours, came the reply, *you stinking humanoid ape! One who owes you a great debt . . .*

"Your name, sir!" Rian interrupted, as the blip drew closer to the center of the screen. "If this long-winded recitation continues, you'll be dead before you get to pronounce it."

My name is Blorg the Devastator.

"Captain, you're as big a liar as you are a fool. You're talking to the man who sent that walking heap of snake droppings back to the pits of his ancestors," Rian studied the screen for a second, and then issued the order for all hands to stand-by.

Wrong, you sweat-reeking primate! You were lucky enough to destroy my flagship, but in your haste to leave you overlooked an ejector-capsule.

Rian and Purpur exchanged stunned looks. The star-pirate thought for a moment before speaking again. "Captain, if you really are Blorg—something I doubt very much—you should be able to recall the last words I said before that encounter was so abruptly terminated." Rian winked at his firstmate. The blip was almost at the center of the screen.

I do, indeed, was the reply. *Those words—which I now return to you, scum—were: Death make you welcome!*

Rian grunted as he was hit with the shock of recognition. Purpur snarled. The pirate hit the intercom key. "You heard that, lads," he said to the crew. "It *is* Blorg . . . so let's finish the job we started back in Primula. Fire at will—and make 'em count!"

Nila couldn't believe what she'd just heard. *Even if Blorg did escape*, she thought, *why would he risk another duel with Rian?* Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the arms of her seat.

Dann was as astonished as everyone else, but he wasted no time as he lined up the black man-o'-war in his gunsights. *There'll be time to speculate about it later*, he thought. *After we put Blorg on ice for good.*

Haaass! Blorg watched as the force-field spread its silver nimbus over the Scourge's outer-plating. *The heroes of Taylos are in for a little surprise*, he gloated to the Ysss who sat beside him. *One that will put a sudden end to their brief careers as liberators.*

The hand-picked Death Legion crew were at the ready, waiting for the order to fire on the Hazard. *Hold your fire until I give the order*, Blorg's thought-voice rang out. *And then hit them with everything you've got.* The gunners and torpedo-crews all stared at their screens in fixed concentration.

Rian noticed the Scourge's silver halo as it appeared on the vidscreen, but had no time to reflect on it. "Open fire!" he ordered, taking the Hazard into a sharp dive.

The surrounding void lit up with the angry flashes of concentrated firepower as the two ships engaged. Streaking past the Scourge, the Hazard banked into a tight turn and then dove up to pursue a course that put it on a straight line with the stern of the slower and heavier

vessel.

"I'm going in under her keel, boys," Rian said through clenched teeth. "We're gonna hang on her tail. So let 'er have it!"

Blorg watched the Hazard on the rear vidscreen and decelerated rapidly as the scanners *bleeped*, heralding its approach. Red flashes in the void outside indicated a heavy concentration of enemy fire, but the force-field was so effective that the ship was not even rocked by its impact. *Open fire!* he ordered, as the Hazard passed beneath the Scourge.

BOOM! WHAAANG! R-R-R-ROOOM! Beams creaked and decks heaved as the Hazard's screens began to buckle under the withering fire of the enemy. "Damn it!" Rian bawled, grabbing onto the console to steady himself, unable to accelerate and get his ship out of range. "Blorg's done something to soup-up his shielding."

"Skipper, we're hit!" a voice barked over the intercom.

Blorg watched with satisfaction as the Hazard pulled ahead of the Scourge. *Shall I turn now, my lord?* his co-pilot asked. *Not yet*, he replied. *Let them think they've got us, so the Hazard will repeat the same maneuver. This time we should be able to finish them off.*

"Gyros in tail-starboard are shaky, skipper. If we sustain another hit there, it could knock 'em out."

"I'll favor the port side," Rian answered over the intercom. "I'm gonna get as close to 'er as possible, this time. Hit 'er with a volley of torpedos. Hang on to your hats!"

Fire lasers! Fire torpedos! Blorg ordered, as the Hazard closed in again. He depressed two keys on the console, correcting his heading as the concussion that

resulted from the close exchange of fire between the two starships began to alter his course. Studying the read-outs on the screens before him, Blorg realized that the Hazard's shields would not be able to withstand the sustained assault.

Rian hung on the tail of Blorg's man-o'-war like grim death itself, determined to penetrate its defense-screens with the force of the Hazard's awesome firepower. He broke out into a cold sweat as he checked the figures on the read-out screens. Purpur read them too, and yowled with disbelief.

"We're hit portside—section three!" a voice squawked over the intercom, as the Hazard began to pass beneath the rapidly-decelerating man-o'-war.

"Tail-screens buckling!" another voice squawked in alarm.

"They won't hold!"

"What's the damage to the enemy?" Rian asked, as the temperature in the control-center soared.

"Zilch! Not a brakking thing!"

"That's impossible!" Rian exclaimed, just as an explosion rocked the Hazard.

"We're hit amidships! It looks bad—real bad!"

That will put an end to the insurgent trash, Blorg gloated, as the Hazard veered sharply off-course, rocked by an explosion that momentarily left its after-image on the screens of the console. *Stay behind her*, Blorg ordered the co-pilot. *I want to see that ship consumed on the vidscreen. Full speed ahead!*

All of them, thought Blorg. *With the sole exception of that old fool in the purple cowl. My agents have done their work well. I would give much to see Rian's face the instant before he is blown to nothingness . . .*

My lord, they're too fast for us—I'm losing them on the vidscreen, the co-pilot informed Blorg, interrupting

his pleasant contemplation.

Haaass! The lord of the Ysss punched-up the long-range scanners, hissing his disappointment at being deprived of the sight of the Hazard's impending destruction. He leaned over the consol and fixed his cold, unblinking stare on the screen of the forward-scanner.

The blip that represented the Hazard smeared and distorted for a moment, and then dilated back into its original shape. *They've just entered the atmosphere of the world X-8,* the co-pilot remarked, punching-up the appropriate star-chart on the locator-screen.

As the image zoomed-up to full magnification, Blorg glanced at the accompanying read-out. X-8 was a world considered by the Taylians to be non-viable for colonization or exploitation: two of its three continents were in the north-temperate and frigid zones, still covered by the retreating glacial masses of a recent iceage; the third was in the tropics, and consisted mainly of barren deserts or impenetrable rain forests, both thought to be uninhabitable by higher forms of life.

A nice hospitable place, thought Blorg. *It is a pity that the Hazard's reactors are going to blow, because the thought of Rian and his friends stranded forever on such a desolate place appeals to me greatly. Their sufferings would be much-prolonged.*

Suddenly, the screen of the forward-scanner flared as it registered a tremendous explosion. The read-outs on the Scourge's instrument panel went haywire for a moment. Blorg watched carefully until they stabilized once more. Then he looked back at the scanner-screen: the Hazard's blip had disappeared.

Destroyed! Destroyed! Blorg exulted. *More souls for the hungry mouth of hell!* A dark joy welled up inside of him. *This night I will make a great offering to the god of death.*

Approaching the atmosphere of X-8, my lord, the co-pilot told him.

Turn the ship around and put us on a one-eighty degree course, Blorg replied. *Then accelerate to hyperspace entry speed.*

One-eighty. Preparing to accelerate.

And now, we shall go back to Flaigon and give the Dark Emperor the good news . . .

6 / Shipwrecked on Azitlin

As the Scourge streaked through hyperspace, bound for the barren and rocky surface of the black planet, Blorg imagined that his next view of the dead world would be lovelier than any that had gone before. Returning to Ylang's homeworld had always been pleasant for the lord of the Ysss, because the sight of Flaigon on his vidscreens, with its seas of shadow and gaping craters, reminded him of the grinning skulls of the dead. For Blorg was a connoisseur of death; as other beings collected electro-stamps or autographed holo-images, he collected skulls.

His spacious living-quarters in Kordor resembled a catacomb; and his den was a veritable boneyard. The ancient Mordlings, those most horrible of all mortal creatures, had been the architects of Lord Blorg's domicile; and death was its decorator. Black and white were the predominant colors, the radiant basalt of the Forbidden City's surfaces setting of the chalky white of bleached bones. The Devastator's victims, no matter how recalcitrant or rebellious in life, served Blorg well in death, their bones providing his furniture and utensils. The arms and legs of his chairs and tables were more than arms and legs in name only; he drank from a skull and ate from a brainpan; he shook hands with the

dead every time he opened a door; and the walls of his chambers were hung with what the Ysss considered to be works of art: triangles of skulls—humanoid, animaloid and insectoid, grisly assemblages whose component elements were the heads of those who had once opposed him or incurred his displeasure.

And this time, the sight of the great black skull that was Glaigon would be invested with a special significance for the reptiloid lord, as it became the emblem of his latest triumph.

How satisfying, thought Blorg. *The joys of mating pale beside those of revenge. . .*

As the concussion from the massive explosion shuddered its beams and strained its outer-plating, the Hazard was bathed in a scorching wave of furiously churning energy. "Activate scrambler!" Red Rian grunted, feeling as if his guts were being wrenched out of his body.

"Scrambler activated!" Ween Leever shouted back, his vision beginning to blur from the vibrations that shook the starship.

"We're going down," the star-pirate said. He gestured to Purpur. "Activate the surface-scanners and find me a decent place to land on that big blob of desolation." Glancing back at the screens, he was relieved to see that Blorg's ship had changed its course and was speeding off in the opposite direction. His ruse had worked!

The Hazard had been badly-damaged in the encounter, and Rian knew he had to get away from Blorg and take her down before the reactors backed up, turning the ship into a momentary supernova. And the only way to get that murder-obsessed snake off his back was to make him think his intended victims had been

destroyed.

As soon as the Hazard had entered the atmosphere of X-8, Rian gave the order to fire all the Hazard's torpedos, once they were pre-set in a magnetic interlock. This resulted in their rendezvous and simultaneous detonation. Then, at the moment of explosion, the activation of the scrambler—Ween's marvelous anti-detection gizmo—fouled the Scourge's instruments, causing Blorg to think that the Hazard had blown her reactors and been consumed.

So far, so good, the star-pirate thought. *Blorg goes away happy, and we live to fight another day. But the next time we meet, I'll be dealing the cards.*

"Ween Nerdeen," he yelled aloud, "I love ya—you baggy-eyed little fuzz-ball! Make a mental note to tell the League to start outfitting its starships with those scramblers of yours, boy."

"First we've got to get back in one piece. And don't call me that!"

Rian tugged at his beard distractedly. That was a sobering thought. Even if they were lucky enough to land in one piece—and he had his doubts about that, getting the ship aloft again was going to be no mean trick. "I have every confidence in you, Weenie-boy," Rian said, the exhuberance in his voice lacking its counterpart in his convictions. "We'll be back in action in no time."

Purpur's meow directed his skipper's attention to the scanner screens. At ultra-high magnification they revealed the presence of a fairly large open area in the otherwise unbroken expanse of rain forest. "Hang on to your hats," Rian said, "I'm taken' 'er down!" The ship began to wobble as part of its stabilizing system shorted-out. "If any of you are alive after we crash-land, I'll expect your personal thanks." Rian looked

over his shoulder at Nila. She gave him a strained smile. "See you on X-8, babe," he said.

Quaarg ran his four black-gloved hands over the smooth surface of glowing basalt and peered around the corner, holding his breath as he did. Nothing. The corridor was empty. With a hiss of relief, he proceeded on his way with the cautious tread of one who walks on a carpet of serpent's eggs.

The Dark Emperor had been in a playful mood ever since Lord Blorg's departure, and its latest amusement was one that all the inhabitants of Kordor found very unsetttling. To while away the hours pleasantly, Ylang had set the Mordling clones to prowl the Forbidden City's corridors . . . on empty stomachs, to boot.

After a few days of this, even the Ysss were nervous wrecks, for no one was ever sure whether or not death lurked just around the next corner. The horrific Mordlings, gigantic as they were, crept through the passages of the Forbidden City with the stealth of cats, and waited patiently to spring on the unsuspecting mice who served the Devourer. Quaarg wished that Blorg would finish his business in Taylos and hurry back. He was as eager to see the Devastator as a bride-to-be waiting at the altar for the first glimpse of her overdue groom.

If only Ylang would feed the damned things, Quaarg thought, his body tensing as he approached another corner. *Then they'd lose interest and leave us alone.* He didn't mind so much that the Mordlings killed and devoured by the dozen slaves and their guards; that was merely a minor inconvenience, something the young reptiloid lord could live with. What really disturbed Quaarg was the fact that the awful creatures regarded the Ysss as their favorite food. That was hard to take.

And how shocking they were to behold! Even the dark Yss blanched at the sight of them: over thirty feet tall, eyes flaring, talons flexing, scales glittering morbidly, the ground thundering beneath their feet as they charged, shrieking like a broadcast from hell! Quaarg thought of the creation myth of his people, where the Ysss were created from the stuff of the dreams of the serpent-god, Hiisazel, once it had mingled with the fluids of Aaal, the goddess who embodid Sserp. And he thought that the Mordlings must have been the product of some insane deity's worst nightmare.

Slowly he peered around the corner. Just as he did, he heard a shriek that turned the blood in his veins to something resembling the contents of a frozen pipeline. At the far end of the corridor, he saw four of his brother-reptiloids skid around the corner, bounce off the wall and fall all over each other in their haste. They were up in a flash, off and running followed a moment later by that thing from the sub-cellars of hell—a hungry Mordling!

Haaa-aa-ass! Haaa-aa-ass! Quaarg, once he had recovered from the shock of what he had seen, turned on his heel and shot down the corridor, trying desperately to recapture the feeling of ovoid security he knew in the days before he was hatched. In the distance ahead of him, he saw three helmeted heads pop out from behind a wall and peer around the corner, their visors glowing with the reflected light of the walls and ceiling.

Mordling! Mordling! Quaarg shouted telepathically, his four arms waving wildly in the air, flailing like the limbs of a pair of drowning twins. The helmets popped back out of sight. Quaarg skidded around the sharp turn on one foot, smashed into the far wall, bounced off the black stone and landed flat on his back. By the time he

was able to scremble to his feet, the four Ysss behind him came screeching around the corner, digging in with their heels to retard their breakneck speed.

Clong! Blang! They, too, smacked into the black wall, bounced back and fell to the floor, taking the unfortunate Quaarg down with them, their body-armor clattering on the basalt with the sounds of combat in a junkyard. *Mordling!* the mental yell went up *Mordling!*

Ylang laughed and lit up the lair with a thunderous display of pyrotechnics that could have been used to celebrate a national holiday in hell. *This is great sport!* the Dark Emperor thought gleefully, as the horde in the antechamber pounded on the doors to the lair and begged admittance. Seeing that its lair was the only place in Kordor that was off-limits to the Mordlings, Ylang had no lack of visitors these days.

Who is it? the Devourer asked coyly . . .

There was no way you could possibly call it a soft landing. Out of control, the Hazard fell several hundred yards short of the clearing and tore through the dense jungle-vegetation of the surrounding rain forest, gouging its way through the matted, interlocking wall of foliage, bowling over thick trees festooned with lianas and leaving a swath of fire in its superheated path.

But the crash-landing was a happy accident: the thick vegetation had retarded the starship's momentum, braking its progress so much that by the time the clearing was reached, the Hazard ground to a halt. And the good ship's occupants were all fortunate enough to escape with their lives. A few bones were broken here and there, and many of the crew had headaches that made a hangover seem like a lover's caress, but all on board thanked the Infinite for having decided to bet the long-shot.

After he'd made sure the crew were all in one piece, Rian helped Nila out of the Starship. The earth beneath his feet was hard and level, as if it had been tamped down on purpose. In the tropical woodland that surrounded the clearing, birds and animals cawed and roared, shrieked and jabbered, all startled by the Hazard's spectacular land. Behind Rian, the night sky glowed red as acres of foliage caught fire in the wake of his spectacular landing.

"This is not exactly downtown Libera," the skipper of the Hazard said, checking to reassure himself that his head and neck were still connected.

"Home never looked so good," Nila replied. "Especially when you consider the alternatives."

"As somebody once said," Rian whispered in her ear, "it's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to be shipwrecked here." He leaned over and kissed the nape of her neck.

"Stop that!" Nila said, shrugging him off with a toss of her golden hair. "Rian you've got a defective sense of occasion." Dann came up beside them.

"Are you all right?" he asked the lady from the golden planet. She answered with a sweet smile and a kiss on the cheek. Rian made a sour face and turned to stare out into the night. At the far end of the clearing, directly opposite him, he noticed huge piles of stone, dimly-lit by the fire's flickering light. He wondered what they could be. Then his thoughts turned to Blorg. *Looks like good guys don't have a monoply on the breaks. But the next time I get my hands on that scaly, hissing bas . . .*"

"Hey, Rian!" Ween Leever shouted, emerging from the ship. "Guess what? The transmitter's out. Must have shorted when we took one in the bow."

"Think you can fix it?" he asked, when Ween came

up beside him.

Ween shook his head. "No way. The circuitry's melted down into a glob as big as your fist. It looks like the only way we're gonna get to communicate with anybody is through prayer."

Dann smiled when he heard this. "Ween's on the right track," he said. "Don't forget you've got a member of the Fellowship with you."

"He's right, Rian," Nila said. "Dann should be able to contact Garthane through his powers of mind."

The buccaneer grinned broadly. "That's right! How about giving your father a buzz, Danni-boy?" He gave Dann a playful tap on the chin. "And tell him to get the League-techs working on those scramblers," he added as an afterthought. "If Blorg's little pals have their ships rigged-out with those shields that old snake-brain had, the League's gonna be in big trouble."

"It was a force-field of some kind," Ween volunteered. "From what I saw on the vidscreen, I'd say it was light-energy . . . in some kind of sub-atomic particulate suspension, combining with magnetic . . ."

"Save that for the Greeban techies," Rian interrupted. "What frazzes my mind is wondering where Blorg ever got hold of such advanced technology. The Ysss don't have the brain-space in their bony noggins to invent the wheel, let alone come up with something like that."

"Ylang," Ween replied. "It's got to be Ylang. The thing is disgusting, but it's also incredibly intelligent. Remember the time we were on Flagion? Or should I say *in* Flaigon? When Ylang entered our minds and overrode our wills? . . . Well, just before I went under, I got a glimpse of some of the stuff it keeps in its mind. And believe me, what's stored in its memory-banks is fantastic. It knows almost . . . everything."

Rian thought about this. "So that's why it's been so quiet for the past year or so," he said after a long pause. "That poor imitation of an atomic furnace has picked up some new tricks."

"We've got to warn the League," Nila said.

"Yeah. The lady's right,"Rian told them as Purpur came up noiselessly in the shadows behind them. "Dann-boy," the pirate continued, "how about it?"

Dann nodded and stepped back from his friends, turning to stare out into the darkness. He began to breathe deeply and rhythmically, his muscles relaxing as he did. After a few seconds, his eyes rolled up in his head and his mouth relaxed into a serene smile. Then his breathing began to slow down, indicating that his heartbeat and pulse-rate were lowering as he entered the trance-state.

No one made a sound. Even the creatures of the rain forest were silent now, having spent their choruses of fright and outrage. The only sounds to be heard were the far-off conversations of the Taylians as they clambered in and out of the Hazard, and the roar and crackle of the fire, muted now as it died out. The humanoids heard nothing but the sound of their own breathing. Only Purpur heard something, his cat's-ears inclining in the direction of the sound, a soft, momentary rustling in the shrubbery off to Dann's left.

Dann's face lit up with the ecstasy of communion with the Infinite, the beatific smile on his face a familiar sight to those who knew the Fellowship of Light. Swaying back and forth gently, moved by the rhythms of his own breathing, the young Aquaean was totally oblivious to the universe of external sensation.

Nila watched Dann carefully, struck by the serenity and beauty of his expression. *He looks looks so beautiful,* she thought. *I'd like to go up to him and . . .*

Suddenly, Purpur snarled as something crackled in the underbrush. Just as Rian was turning in the felinoid's direction, he saw an object fly out of the darkness and strike Dann a hard blow to the side of the head . As the star-pirate whipped-out his zapper, Dann collapsed on the packed earth of the clearing. Purpur stepped out of the shadows with an angry toss of his silver mane, broke the silence with a deep-throated roar, and plunged into the foliage.

"*Purr!*" Rian shouted as Nila and Ween ran to Dann's side. *Purr—come back! It's pitch-black and you don't know what's out there!*"

Anlix Ozain, Supreme Commander of the League of Free Worlds, fidgeted at his desk in the Headquarters building at Libera. It wasn't like Nila to be late, especially when she knew there was a staff conference scheduled for one hour after her arrival. The chair creaked as he shifted his burly frame, and his bald head reflected the light of the lumi-disks like a dull mirror as he leaned over his desk and scrawled a message on a senso-pad with his golden tele-pen.

The text of the message was an order requesting the League's com-center to transmit immediately to Taylos and seek a clarification of the lady Nila's present status and inquire as to the whereabout of the Hazard.

Deep in thought, Ozain put down the tele-pen, leaned back in his creaking chair, and ran his hand over the smooth hemisphere of his cranium. *Nila and Rian are important members of the inner council: they're needed here to discuss the League's plans to liberate the Havanal galazy. Where the hell are they*?

He stared out the window that faced his desk, into the golden afternoon of Aurea Solis, and hoped they would touchdown before he heard from Taylos.

Springing into the underbrush with the grace of a panther, Purpur raced after Dann's unknown assailant. Then he stopped for a moment by the trunk of a large tree, listening to pick up the sound and scent of his quarry. Penetrating the jungle blackness like an infrared scanner, his cat's-eyes followed the trail of matted grass that indicated the direction of flight. Out in the clearing, Rian bellowed for him to come back, but Purpur disregarded his skipper's warnings. Does a cat abandon the pursuit of a mouse just because you call for it to stop? Can the rubberband of reason hold back the pressure of the steel spring of an instinct as old as the feline species itself?

The felinoid moved on, his mane sparkling in the moonlight like a white-cap on an angry sea. Purpur's instincts were operating at maximum output, concentrated and focused by the lens of his critical intelligence. He had already processed the input of his senses and arrived at three conclusions regarding whatever it was that he pursued: *One*: it was a biped; *Two*: it was probably humanoid: *Three*: it was not alone.

They had also stopped, listening for him, but he was quicker and had halted before the group ahead did. He heard the harsh sounds of their labored breathing and their whispered jabber. The language they spoke was unintelligible to the catman, but he heard them repeat one word over and over. *Tenoxatli*. It must have been their name for him, because all repeated it fearfully each time it was spoken. *Tenoxatli*. The speakers called him that, pronouncing it in voices colored by overtones of dread. Well, he would soon give them something to dread, all right . . .

Garthane's cry of alarm rang out in the dark cabin of

the starship that took him to the Fellowship's stronghold in the outworlds of the Nova Vega system. Shivering, he sat up in his bed and wiped away the beads of cold sweat that had formed on his forehead. The most serene being in two galaxies had just awakened from one of his rare nightmares . . . or so he thought.

The High Master took a deep breath and blinked his eyes in concentration, trying to recall the details of his dream. There had been green, a sea of green; and fire; great, lapping tongues of flame that spoke in the roaring gutturals of disaster; and there was Dann, his son, standing in a silver light, surrounded by a blackness as deep as the pockets of night. Dann was trying to tell him something . . . something urgent and important. But it was all scrambled in his head, dark and unclear. Garthane, an adept at interpreting the meaning of dreams, understood none of it.

I must be getting old, he thought. *I'm beginning to feel the weight of my centuries. The dream must have merely been the expression of an old man's growing fears about the future.* He shook his head as he settled back into bed. *Thank the Infinite it was only a dream. By now, Dann and his companions are probably in their beds on Aurea Solis . . .*

There were screams in the rain forest when Purpur sprang at his prey, and men screamed louder than the birds. *"Tenoxatli!"* they screamed, dropping their flint-headed spears and axes of obsidian, scattering in terror. *"Tenoxatli!"* And their terror was justified as the giant felinoid attacked, roaring like a tiger, tearing like a leopard, springing like a panther and striking like a lion. Ten men scattered as the angry catman attacked; eight of them would never rise to run again. Purpur roared his trimph at the moon of X-8, causing the jungle

to fall silent. The two survivors of the hunt he took back to the Hazard, where Rian and the crew stood, zappers and laser-rifles at the ready.

The star-pirate gave a sigh of relief as his first mate emerged from the green wall of foliage, and ran out to greet him, flanked by six of his crew. He studied the forms of the two prisoners who trailed behind the felinoid, their heads bent low as the cat-man dragged them by their long and lustrous black hair. Purpur stopped when his skipper came up, and released the prisoners with a growl that rumbled up from the bottom of the barrel of his chest; the two men jabbered with fear and fell prostrate at his feet. Then he embraced Rian, and emitted a high-pitched, questioning yowl.

"Dann's in his berth," the pirate replied, reading his mate's signal as he stepped out of the furry embrace. "Doc says it's a concussion." Purpur noticed the grave look on his skipper's face. "The kid's in a deep coma." He shook his head. "So we can just forget about communicating with Garthane."

Purpur's mewing reflected the sadness in his heart, for he loved his friend from Aquaea. *Dann had to recover. He had to . . .* He looked down at the prisoners *. . . or else there'd be two more men on the way to the halls of their ancestors.*

Rian activated the lumi-beam he held in his hand and trained it on the prisoners, asking Purpur to yank them to their feet. The natives were humanoid all right, small to medium in height, dressed only in sandals, loincloth and headbands that supported three white, flaring plumes. They had round heads, almond eyes, and generous, hooked noses; their skins were dark as bronze, tanned by long exposure to the planet's sun.

The light on Rian's translator-belt flashed as he depressed its lingua-scanner button. "Speak up, boys,"

he said, addressing the prisoners. "Loud and clear, now. State your names and your business."

"Tenoxatli!" they babbled, pointing respectfully at Purpur, *"Tenoxatli lata nexatawan, Kizat nal attu sena entutallati."*

"Smoking bolt-holes!" the buccaneer exclaimed disgustedly, fiddling with the semantic-locator dial on his belt. "These bozos don't even speak a language whose roots are listed in the galactic index. Must be a relatively new culture."

He pointed at the ground, lifting his arm in ever-widening circles to include the clearing and the rain forest that surrounded it. "Where are we?" Rian asked slowly, in the manner people frequently adopt when talking to foreigners in the irrational belief that decreased speed will provide the key to decode their words. "What . . . is . . . the name . . . of . . . this . . . place?"

The prisoners studied him for a moment, listening carefully to the tone of his words. A look of comprehension flooded the face of one of them, and he answered. *"Azitlin, Nala tehu tehuatali Azitlin."*

Red Rian smiled as he was rewarded for his linguistic efforts. "Welcome to Azitlin," he told Purpur. "Okay, mates. Let's get back to the ship.

"Before you do, drop your weapons on the ground!" A bass voice growled from the darkness in a language Rian and his crew understood.

The star-pirate turned around slowly as he dropped his zapper, and shone his lumi-beam in the direction of the voice.

"Tell the others to drop their weapons, red-beard— or I'll sizzle you in your own fat!" the voice growled again, as Rian's lumi-beam glittered on the barrels of a dozen laser-rifles.

Ylang's obscene laughter filled the corridors of Kordor as Blorg emerged from the levitator and froze in his tracks, turned to stone by the sight of the hideous giant that charged at him, shrieking with bloodlust.

Coming to his senses an instant later, as the ground shook beneath his feet, Blorg whipped out his zapper, steadied it like a tripod with two more of his arms, and went into a crouch. *Bzzz-z-z-zzzat!* The weapon flared and its beam lanced out, striking the Mordling full in the chest. The monstrosity staggered back a few feet, beating frantically at the smoking scales on its pectorals.

Sunlight and soft breezes! Blorg cursed as he fumbled to adjust the zapper's setting. *That shot would have blown five men away!* He flicked the switch to high just as the beast began to charge again, the beams of its eyes glaring like satanic headlights.

Yeeee-yaaa-a-a-ooo-o-o-r-r-rrow! The horror screamed, lunging at the lord of the Ysss, the green poison of its rage dripping from the daggers in its jaws.

Haaa-a-a-ass . . . Blorg exhaled and steadied his hand before he touched the zapper's firing-button. The thing's shadow fell over him like a stormcloud, but still he waited, lining up its disgusting head in his gunsight. *Now!* he thought, scorched by its searing breath. *Now* . . .

Bzzz-z-z-zzat! Phwooom! The Mordling stopped suddenly and straightened up, its arms flailing out and thwacking the stone ceiling. Its head was now a fireball, and the saliva it drooled turned to molten lava. Smoke billowed out of its mouth in the visual equivalent of a scream. And then, with the sound of a wall falling, the Mordling crashed to the ground, its brains reduced to ashes.

Bravo, Blorg! The Dark Emperor's thoughts boomed

in his head. The lord of the Ysss got to his feet and holstered his zapper with two shaking hands as the Devourer ordered the rest of the fiends back to their vaults. *Haaa-aa-aas! Haaa-aa-ass!* The Forbidden City sounded like a steam-room as the frazzled Ysss overlords sighed their collective relief. Blorg bathed in the vapors of their gratitude as he walked stiffly in the direction of Ylang's lair.

I was merely amusing myself in your absence, my son, the Great Devourer told him with a chuckle that could have blackened a field of lilies. *I have taken to little games as a source of distraction. The sight of the Mordling clones reminded me of the thousand years of my childhood.*

Blorg shuddered involuntarily as he approached the doors to the lair. Ylang-Ylang's sense of humor, like the rest of it, was unusual, to say the least.

Come inside, sweet Blorg. I have one more little surprise for you, my darling.

As the doors groaned open and the mind-raped herald roared out his name, Blorg tensed his muscles at the prospect of more of what the Dark Emperor considered fun-and-games. He loosened the zapper in its holster and shaded his eyes from the vile effulgence of his master as he entered, senses alert and prepared for anything.

Anything, that is, but what he saw next. There before him, in the center of the throne-room, stood a group of humanoids. He squinted as he peered through his one-way visor, trying to make out their features in the gloom that came from Ylang's energies being banked low.

Haaass! The reptiloid gasped as he recognized the figures who stood in the center of the group. He couldn't believe his eyes. Shaking his head and blinking rapidly, he looked again . . . and saw Nila, Dann Ory-

zon, Purpur, the crew of the Hazard and . . . none other than Red Rian!

Rian! he thought, paralyzed by astonishment as the burly, red-bearded skipper of the Hazard screamed his name in rage and charged across the floor at him. *How is this poss . . . ?*

Before Blorg could complete the thought Rian hit him with a flying tackle that brought him to the ground, his black body-armor clacking on the stone floor like the castanets of a demented gypsy.

Blorg's hands flexed into claws and descended on Rian's back as the lair shook with Ylang's evil laughter . . .

7 / Ylang's Creations

"Hey—I know you guys!" Red Rian exclaimed, as the rising sun of Azitlin suffused the sky with broad bands of purple and violet. The Hazard stood surrounded by several hundred tall, broad-shouldered men and women in helmets and breastplates of barikrome and cloaks of synthi-fur. The men all wore long, untrimmed beards and the women's hair hung down to the small of their backs. The new arrivals were armed to the teeth and looked as if they meant business, what with all the zappers and laser-rifles in evidence, and the double-bladed axes of durallium that hung from their broad belts.

"You're Valsings—from Havanal," the skipper of the Hazard continued, nodding at the burly man who was obviously the leader of the armed band. "I had a few brushes with you people before the Dark Empire occupied your galaxy."

The man smiled back at Rian with a smile as cold and sharp as the axe that hung at his side. "Yes, I remember," he said. "You're Rian, the Taylian pirate we drove out of the sector that contained our homeworld, Vormergoord."

"I prefer to think of it as a strategic retreat," Rian replied immediately. "After all, your ships outnumbered mine ten to one." The burly man's smile turned

into a smirk. "Five or six to one, and I would've stuck around," the star-pirate added insolently.

"Careful, Red-beard," said the tall brunette who stood by the chief's side. "Another lie such as that could stick in your throat and clog your windpipe."

"Now, hold on, lady," the pirate retorted. "The starship hasn't been launched yet that can down the Hazard in a fair fight."

"You dare to say that," she countered, "after a single Dark Empire vessel blows you out of the void!"

The burly man raised his hand. "That's enough, Zeif." He turned back to Rian. "We caught the encounter on our long-range scanners from our ships here on the ground. I was amazed to see a lone imperial craft dare to engage an enemy. We were sure that more starships were on the way."

Rian made a sour face. "I guess you didn't pick up what really happened at that range. They've come up with some kind of force-field that's impossible to penetrate with lasers or torpedos."

"That is not good news," the man said, shaking his head.

"And that's not all. I thought I'd killed that old snake, Blorg, during the Battle of Aurea Solis back in Primula but then he . . ."

"Blorg!" the man exclaimed, interrupting Rian. He exchanged dark looks with the woman beside him. "If we had known that was Blorg out there, we would have come to your aid, no matter what."

"I couldn't touch him," Rian said, in a wistful voice. "Couldn't even put a dent in his shielding." He studied the couple. "So Blorg's no friend of yours either, hah?"

"We owe him a blood-debt," the Valsing-chief replied grimly. "We led the defense of our galaxy, and when it fell . . . Blorg ordered our homeworld de-

stroyed."

Rian's eyes met the man's. "Was your homeworld . . . irradiated?"

The Valsing took a deep breath before he replied. "Exactly. Nothing lives on the surface of Vormergoord. How do you know this?"

When he answered, Rian's eyes were as cold as deep space. "They did the same thing to Urgel—my homeworld."

"Then we have much in common." The man offered Rian his hand.

"We share a blood-debt," the star-pirate replied, shaking the proffered hand.

"I am Ordlar," the man told Rian and his companions. "And this bold woman is Zeif, my bride." He broke out into a wide grin. "Zeif is a travel agent. She has sent many soldiers of the Dark Empire on a one-way trip to hell."

"Then Zeif is a lady worthy of the greatest respect," Rian replied. "My compliments. Do Valsing women always fight beside their men?"

"Always. And sometimes in front of them," Zeif told him, winking broadly at Ordlar.

"You have much to tell us, Rian," the Valsing-chief said. "Three of our ships escaped when Havanal fell, and we came to X-8—or Azitlin, as the aborigines call it. We pick off empire ships in the vicinity from time to time, but are out of touch with intergalactic events. We were sure that Primula had fallen."

"Have I got a surprise for you," Rian replied. He proceeded to tell the Valsings of the armada's defeat and the subsequent liberation of Taylos.

"Now tell us how you managed to escape from Blorg," Ordlar said when the pirate had finished.

As the sun came up over the rain forest, Rian ex-

plained about the torpedo-interlock and his use of Ween's scrambler.

"This scrambler, could it get us onto Flaigon?" the Valsing asked.

Rian shot him a quizzical look. "Well, yeah," he replied. "But why d'you want to go to that black hole?"

"To kill the Dark Emperor," Ordlar replied matter-of-factly. "After all, Blorg is merely his agent. The blood-debt ultimately falls to him."

"Zel's bells!" the star-pirate exclaimed. "You've never met Ylang-Ylang, have you, Ordlar?" The Valsing shook his head. "Well, I have," Rian continued. "First of all, Ylang's not a him, but an *it*. Second, it seems to be immortal. I'm not at all sure you *can* kill it."

"My people have a saying, Rian: *Whatever lives can die*."

"Oh, wow!" Rian heard Ween exclaim behind him.

"Your chief tech-head will build scramblers for us in his fine workshop," Ordlar said, pointing to Ween. "Then we will be able to touch down on Flaigon. Once there, we will storm Ylang's palace . . . and destroy it."

Rian sighed. "*That's* a one-way trip, my friend."

"We are prepared for that," Zeif told him. "Ever since our home was destroyed, we have been ready to dwell in the halls of our ancestors."

Ordlar looked up at Purpur. "This gentleman is from Yahwoo, is he not?" Purpur nodded. "You are the one the native prisoners call *Tenoxatli*."

"Just who is *Tenoxatli*? Rian asked.

"You shall find out in a moment," Zeif told him, just as the sound of flutes and drums and rattles could be heard in the distance. Rian turned to look across the clearing. With a start, he realized that last night's dimly-seen heaps of stone were actually pyramids, laboriously hand-carved and assembled from massive

blocks of stone. And at that moment, thousands of the natives of Azitlin—male and female, young and old—were gathering around the bases of the pyramids, speaking to each other in hushed whispers and glancing around nervously from time to time at the far end of the clearing where the Hazard had landed.

"What's going on over there?" the buccaneer asked.

"A little celebration in honor of our friend *Tenoxatli*," Ordlar replied. "They saw and heard his rampage in the jungle last night, and are convinced he is the incarnation of their jaguar-god. Now they are holding a great ceremony to propitiate him."

"Why are they dragging those people up the steps of that pyramid?" Rian asked. "Why are they struggling?"

"Because," came the reply, "the ceremony entails human sacrifice."

Ah-hah-hah-hah-hahahahaha-aaaaa! As Blorg's fingers wrapped around his arch-enemy's windpipe, Ylang-Ylang's laughter sent tremors rolling through the floor of the lair. *Enough, sweet Blorg!* the Dark Emperor commanded, as Rian's eyes began to roll up in his head. Blorg felt the pirate's body go limp in his arms.

Surprise! Surprise! Ylang's thought-voice boomed, the tones of its merriment darker and more awful than the sound of the war-trumpets of the Death Legion. *Cast it aside, my son. It is not your enemy, but merely a simulacrum of my own creation.*

Blorg did as he was ordered and got to his feet, trembling all over from the shock induced by the tyrant's little games. He looked down at the form on the floor. *It looks exactly like Red Rian*, he thought. *To the last detail. But I have destroyed Red Rian . . .*

Then he looked over to the group of humanoids clus-

tered in the center of the lair. Nila, Dann Oryzon. The felinoid, Purpur. The boy, Ween Leever. The Taylian pirates. Who else could they be? But it was impossible!

No, my darling, the emperor reassured him, *they are not what they seem to be. They are merely replicas of their originals . . . duplicate copies from the great press of life.*

But how . . . ?

The time they were here in Kordor, as I was about to devour them, I went deep inside their minds and bodies . . . and took unto myself all their thoughts and feelings, the patterns of their minds and instincts—the very imprint of their genes. And, to pass the time while you were away, I used the workshops of my ancestors to clone their likenesses.

They are indeed the same, Father Ylang—to all outward appearances, Blorg replied, after a long scrutiny of the group.

Inwardly as well, my son, the Devourer purred. *The simulacra you see before you actually believe they are the originals.*

Why has my master done this thing?

At first, merely as an amusement—a little jest to enliven your return. But then, when I entered your mind and discovered that Rian and the others were destroyed without either Garthane or the League of Free Worlds knowing about it, I conceived of an opportunity to make a bold move in the great galactic game.

I propose to send the clones back to Yahwoo. Then, when the League attempts to penetrate Havanal, my creations will do two little things to aid our forces. First, they will sabotage and reveal the League's battle-plans; I will put them in touch with your Taylian agents, Lord Blorg. Second, they will assassinate an old friend of ours . . . Garthane.

Since the clones, for all practical purposes, are Rian and his friends, they will act exactly as the originals would have acted. The lair grew dark as Ylang's energies flickered and banked low. *The only difference is that I have programmed them to serve my purposes. I have even thought of a way to make their rescue in space seem plausible.*

How will Ylang send them back to Yahwoo?

In the Hazard, my son.

But the Hazard no longer exists!

Its replica does. I have reconstituted it from the data gathered from the probe I made when it touched-down here. My Mordling beauties have done a remarkable piece of work.

Blorg shivered as the black tendrils that promised the gift of Ylang's ecstasy coiled around his ankles. *My master has worked miracles.*

It is no more than one has a right to expect from a god, the Devourer replied modestly.

When the sun of Azitlin was at its zenith, the natives all gathered around the base of the central pyramid and stared up at the scene that was taking place by the stone altar on its levelled summit. Every time the chanting priests there would intone the word, *Tenoxatli,* the on-lookers below would turn their heads in the direction of the Hazard and repeat the name of the jaguar-god in awed whispers.

All morning, since the sun had first come up over the horizon, the Azitlini had gone from pyramid to pyramid (there were nine of them) in the course of the great ceremony. Dressed in white robes whose collars, sleeves and hems were embroidered in bright colors, and wearing ritual-masks of animals and birds, topped by headdresses composed of sweeping white plumes,

the priests ascended to the top of each pyramid and made offerings to their gods of food, flowers, incense and blood—cupfuls of it, poured into small basins that stood at the foot of each of the statues representing the gods of Azitlin.

While the offerings were made and the priests intoned their chants, the natives below watched in silence. But as the procession moved to each succeeding pyramid, they broke into shouts and cries. The procession was led by a large group of masked dancers clad only in feathers, loincloths, and bracelets of small, jingling bells they wore on their wrists and ankles. Behind the dancers came a smaller number of musicians who played on drums and long, vertical flutes as well as the rattles made from gourds and the clacking noisemakers they shook in their hands.

The Valsings herded the Hazard's crew over to the edge of the great clearing directly opposite the central pyramid, which sat several hundred yards away. Rian and his companions had all protested strongly when Ordlar mentioned human sacrifice, but the Valsing-chief disregarded their words. And the Valsings, affable as they seemed to be, still surrounded them with drawn weapons.

"It is not our business to meddle with his culture," Ordlar told them. "We are here as fugitives, not as missionaries."

When it was apparent that their hosts would not be persuaded otherwise, Nila asked to be excused in order to nurse Dann Oryzon, who was still in a deep coma.

"Is the lady from Aurea Solis so squeamish, then?" Zeif asked in a voice tinged with contempt.

Nila turned and looked her right in the eye. "Not squeamish, Zeif," she replied coolly. "It's just that I don't share the Valsing passion for blood-letting."

Ordlar laughed at this, and gave Nila permission to return to the starship. Zeif gave her husband a look that could have stripped the scales off a Ysss. Ordlar caught his wife in an affectionate bearhug. "No, my little space-maiden," he crooned. "We must allow for tastes that are different from our own. She is a Primulan, and unaccustomed to bloodshed. The Taylians are different."

"Now, hold on there, Ordlar!" Red Rian snapped. "My men and I don't mind knocking anybody's brains out in open combat, but we draw the line at butchery and human sacrifice!"

"It is none of our business, Captain Rian," the Valsing told him, with a grin. "We just watch. These people," he gestured in the direction of the pyramids, "consider your friend to be a god—as they do the Valsings—and that is how the Azitlini honor their gods. It is their way."

Rian glared at the Valsing. "But you just happen to get a kick out of watching it, don't you, Ordlar?"

Ordlar and Zeif smiled at each other. "That is neither here nor there, Rian," the chief replied, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The pipes shrilled like a cutting wind and the drums beat like thunder as the priests climbed the steps of the central pyramid. His face dark with anger and disgust, Rian turned to Ween Leever. "Give me a run-down on the Hazard's condition, Ween," he said. "Witnessing a bunch of murders is not my idea of how to pass the time." Ordlar shrugged again. Then he and Zeif turned to stare at the scene on the central pyramid, watching with intense expectation. The other Valsings turned as well, although they constantly glanced back at the crew of the Hazard, and kept their fingers on the triggers of their weapons.

Ween's eyes were as wide as saucers, and he didn't seem able to take them off the priests who had reached the altar atop the pyramid and were now gathering around two men and a crippled little girl who were tied there to wooden poles.

"W-Well, s-skipper," the boy-genius stammered, mesmerized by the proceedings across the clearing. "The ship took a beating, a-and lots of shorts in the circuitry. But there's nothing I can't repair in a f-few d-days or a week . . ."

The priests had untied one of the men, and were pulling him down on his back, stretching out his limbs as they did.

"Go on!" barked Rian.

"Except for the c-communicator, all the com-circuits are sh-shot," Ween continued, his eyes never moving from the top of the stone pyramid. "Even the auxiliaries . . ."

One of the priests raised his arms and chanted to the skies in a loud voice, ending with the word, *Tenoxatli*.

" . . . are h-hopelessly fused. We'll never be able to communicate with . . ."

The priest reached inside his robe and pulled out a knife with a long obsidian blade. He leaned over the victim and made a diagonal cut in the man's chest. The victim screamed for a long moment; then his body relaxed. The priest reached into the man's chest, made another cut with the knife, and then removed his hand. He raised his hand to the sky. Then he turned and held it out in the direction of the Hazard.

And there in the priest's open hand, its blood streaming down over his arm, was a human heart. "*Tenoxatli ala anatuatil*!" the priest cried out in a loud voice. Then all the natives began to chant, "*Tenoxatli! Tenoxatli!*"

As Rian watched Ween Leever puke his guts out on

the hardpacked earth, he heard *Tenoxatli's* latest incarnation emit a loud and angry growl behind him.

"That was well-done," Zeif the Valsing remarked casually to her husband.

"Yes," agreed Ordlar. "All except the scream." He turned to face Rian, Purpur and Ween. "That one must have been a prisoner from one of the other tribes," he informed them. "Their own people don't scream, as a rule. It is considered a great dishonor to scream."

Rian shook his head and frowned with disgust as he looked at the Valsing couple. "You people have about as much respect for life as a pair of gar-sharks," he said. "You're as cold-blooded as the Ysss."

Ordlar and Zeif sneered at him. "What really matters is not the way you live," the Valsing-chief told Rian, "but the way you die. That is the path to glory."

"The Valsings have about as much compassion for their fellow-beings as an executioner. Probably less," Rian fumed.

"Compassion breeds weakness," Zeif told him as Ordlar swaggered up to Purpur.

"And you, my friend," he said, standing with his hands on his hips and staring up into the felinoid's face as the priest cut out the heart of the second man. "Does this please you?"

Purpur's upper lip rose above his sharp incisors as he snarled at the Valsing.

"I had hoped it would. Remember, this is all being done for you . . . *Tenoxatli*." Ordlar gestured toward the pyramid, where the screaming crippled girl was being untied. "If this isn't enough," the Valsing said with a smirk, "you can always order a few more."

Whap! Quick as a cat, Purpur raised his right arm and delivered a hard back-hand slap to the side of Ordlar's head. The Valsing sailed backwards and landed on the

packed earth with a thud.

Zeif whipped out her zapper and swept her arm in Purpur's direction. She was just about to pull the trigger when Rian knocked the weapon out of her hand. The Valsing guards trained their weapons on Purpur and Rian. Zeif shouted, "*Kill them*!"

"*Hold it*!" Ween Leever roared, jumping in front of his two companions. "L-Listen, you," he stammered angrily, "if you w-want those scramblers, you'd better not harm a hair on Purpur's mane. Or t-touch him, either," he said, jerking his thumb in his skipper's direction. "Or else, you'd better sh-shoot me, too."

"*Hold your fire*!" Ordlar bellowed, as he got to his feet. "We will do as you say," he told Ween, pausing to wipe the blood from his mouth. "But I reserve the right to settle with the felinoid before we leave this place."

"On a one-to-one basis?" the star-pirate asked sharply.

"Of course, Captain Rian," the Valsing replied. "Ordlar needs no one to kill his enemies for him." He glared at Purpur. The felinoid bared his fangs and returned the Valsing's stare.

As Purpur threw a protective arm over Ween's shoulder, Rian walked up to his friends. "You're all right, lad," he told Ween. "That was a brave thing to do. I'm real proud of you."

Ween blushed and shuffled his feet. Purpur drew the boy closer to him. Just then, the Valsings all turned back in the direction of the central pyramid. The high-priests obsidian knife gleamed in the sunlight. . . .

Inside the Hazard, Nila sat by Dann Oryzon's side, staring intently at his face. The news she'd just received from Doctor Vana, the ship's chief-surgeon, was anything but reassuring. "If we don't get him out of here

soon," the man had told her, "we may never be able to bring him out of the coma he's in. That stone axe Dann got hit with might have caused severe brain-damage. I don't know . . . There's always the chance that, when he comes out of it, he'll spend the rest of his life as a . . . vegetable." Doctor Vana winced when he saw Nila's reaction to this. "I'm sorry, Nila," he said, patting her arm. "But even that depends on whether or not we get out of this place in time."

Nila looked down at the young man in the bio-respirator. Slowly, a tear trickled down her cheek. *You can't die, Dann—you can't,* she thought. *If you do, a part of me dies with you . . .*

Garthane was troubled. The strange sequence of events that had occurred in the past few days had left him feeling dissatisfied and uneasy. First, there was the disturbing dream about Dann's being in danger. Second, there was the mysterious disappearance of the Hazard. And third, the latest happening involving his son, the recent report that the starship had been spotted by a Taylian scout, drifting in space outside the atmosphere of Yahwoo. The High Master immediately gave the order to postpone the mass-initiation ceremony on Palos and then boarded the Fellowship's fastest craft, in order to be by his son's side. And when he had touched-down on Yahwoo, the details he received concerning the Hazard's misfortunes were even stranger than the things that had previously occurred.

Apparently, the Hazard had encountered an unusual phenomenon before it had time to make the leap into hyperspace. A vast, cloud-like mass of unknown properties, some strange and mysterious entity, had enveloped the vessel and left its mark on all aboard her. The thing was of a viral nature, the doctors on Yahwoo

told him, and it had infected Dann and his companions on contact, sickening them and practically obliterating their short-term memories. But they were not seriously harmed, although none of them could recall much of what they had been through since the time they escaped from Flaigon. They were almost completely restored to health by the time the High Master got to see them. The League's doctors were all in the dark as to what the strange entity had been; all they had to go on were the verbal descriptions given them by the crew of the Hazard.

Another bizarre detail of the encounter, and one that puzzled Garthane very much, was the strange physical property of the phenomenon: the thing appeared to generate its own very potent magnetic field. All the Hazard's recording devices had been magnetized, and thereby erased; even the starship's log had been obliterated. Not a single electronic detail of the encounter remained; the only available description was in the form of the crew's vague and confused recollections.

As he entered the hospital, Garthane felt there was some connection between the crew's unusual loss of memory and the erasure of all the starship's electronic recording devices; but he had no idea what it could possibly be. Something about the entire incident disturbed him on a deep, instinctual level. And then there was the necessity of re-briefing Dann and his companions all over again concerning the top-secret details of the coming invasion of Havanal . . .

But that is a small matter, he thought, *compared to having my son and his friends alive and well and safely back in the heart of the allied camp*.

Garthane turned a corner, and came to Dann's room. He paused for a moment, and then knocked on the door. "Come in," said the familiar voice, warming the High

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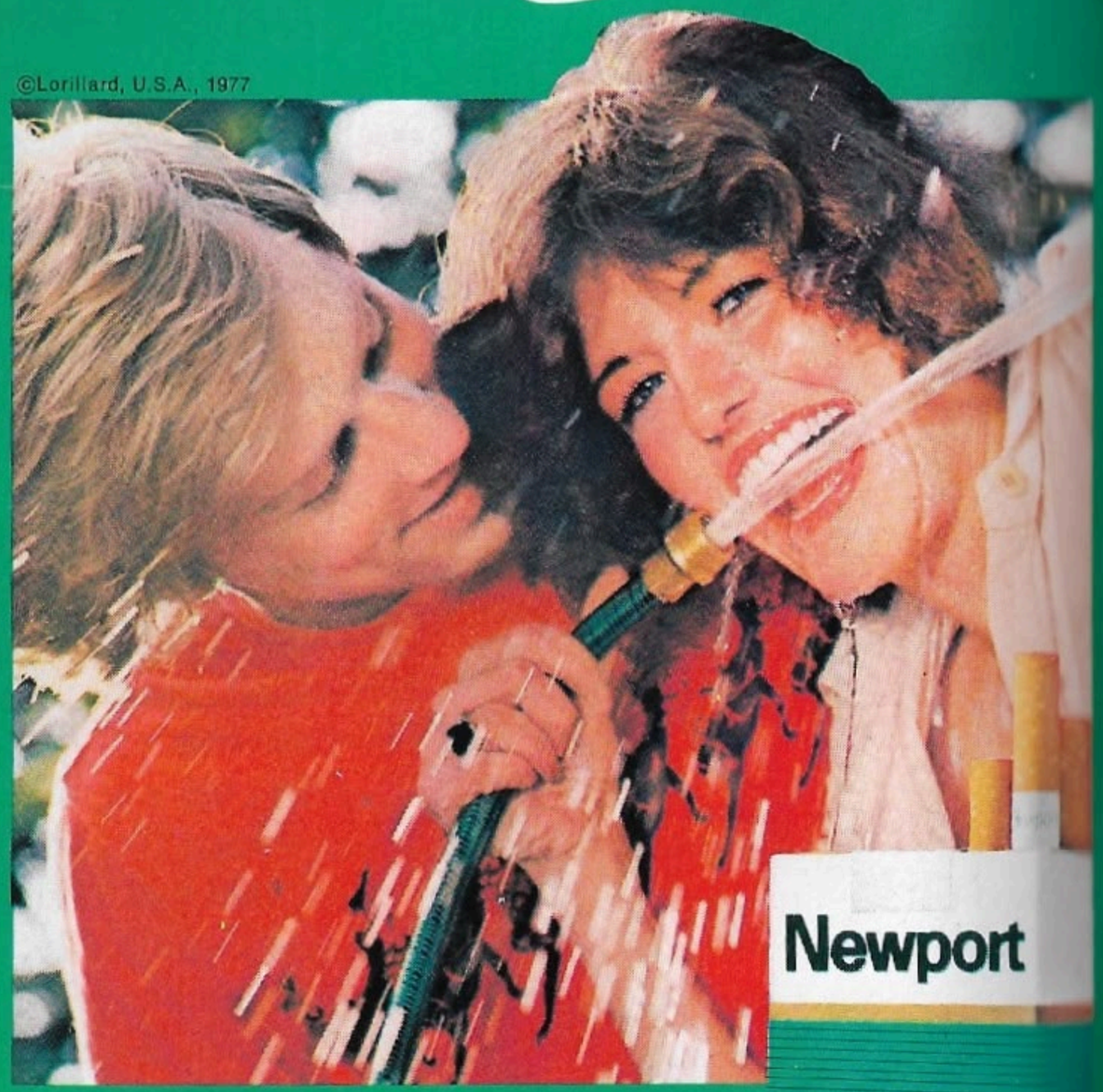

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Master's heart.

Only one thing remains to be done, Garthane thought, as he opened the door. *I must return to that dream and try to make sense of it ...*

Back on Azitlin, Ween Leever worked like a demon. The Valsings possessed three starships of the destroyer class, and Ordlar had instructed the boy-genius to equip each of them with scramblers before he began work on the Hazard. But Ween stood up to the Valsing-chief again, and held out for a fifty-fifty split in his work-day. Ordlar, realizing that Ween held the highest cards in the present hand, grudgingly consented and allowed the tech-head to divide his time equally between the construction of the scramblers and the repair-work on the Hazard.

Red Rian glowed with pride every time he looked at Ween. As hard as he was on the young Greeban, the star-pirate had unconsciously come to regard him as his son, a surrogate child who replaced in his affections the young ones he had lost when his homeworld was destroyed. In fact, once that psychological clue was uncovered, the careful observer became aware that the self-sufficient and emotionally-guarded Rian had actually adopted the entire crew of the starship as his family. To mention this to the pirate, however, entailed the risk of losing one's front teeth, for Red Rian was far from ready to admit this fact, even to himself. But if anyone dared to study the man's behavior for a while, one could not help but notice that, beneath the outer plating of toughness and profanity, the buccaneer related to his friends as warmly as the father of a large and loving family. And Ween's courageous stand had made Rian as proud as any father could ever be of his son's achievements and qualities.

"Y'know, I can't get over the way ol' Weenie-boy faced down that shark, Ordlar," the skipper of the Hazard whispered to Purpur, as they inspected the starship's hull under heavy guard by the gun-toting Valsings. "The kid showed more nerve than a Rodian knife-dancer. Wasn't he great, hah?"

His second-in-command purred loudly, reminding the pirate of a sound ship's reactors humming at the outset of a voyage.

"That gakk, Ordlar," Rian continued, pointing up at a laser-scorched hole in the ship's bright plating. "I'd love to bury my boot in his beard—that bloodthirsty sado-mas!"

Purpur bared his white fangs at this.

Rian patted him on the shoulder. "Well, you'll get your chance to settle his hash soon enough." The felinoid nodded contentedly. Still pointing at the hold above, Rian whispered to Purpur out of the side of his mouth. "Don't look down right away . . . but when you do, check out the stabilizer."

The object of Rian's attention was a thin golden disc, half an inch wide and three inches in diameter, that had been magnetically attached to the plating of the stabilizer fin. He lurched suddenly, pretending to trip, and fell against the ship's hull. When the pirate straightened up again, Purpur noticed that the disc had disappeared. The Valsing guards all laughed at Rian's apparent clumsiness, but not a single one of them had seen the pirate detach and palm the disc.

They continued on their way around the ship, stopping every now and then to inspect the work in progress, the guards keeping about ten feet behind them. "It's a tracer, Purr," Rian whispered. "That explains why old bonehead was waiting for us when we left Yahwoo." He stopped and pointed to the repair-crew

on the scaffold above them. Purpur looked up. So did the guards. "But it's not a Dark Empire tracer," the star-pirate continued. "They don't make 'em that compact. Matter of fact, there's only one place I know that makes 'em like that . . . "

Still looking up at the repair-crew, Purpur nodded solemnly.

"Right," the skipper of the Hazard muttered through clenched teeth, the muscles of his jaw twitching beneath the full red beard. "The planet Greeb. Blorg's got agents in Taylos, all right . . . and guess who they are?"

"Move along, Red-beard," one of the guards called out. "We're not here to spend all day admiring the holes in that creaky old tub of yours."

Rian looked over his shoulder and shot the man a withering glance. "Buster, you wouldn't know a good ship if it touched down on top of your big fat head!"

The guard sneered at him. It seemed to Rian that the Valsings must have all taken courses in sneering. It was their primary facial expression; and he had to admit that they did it better than any other people he'd ever met.

"You keep making jokes," the guard replied, gesturing in the direction of the stone pyramids across the clearing, "and maybe we'll find you a spot on top of that altar. Those priests would really like to get their hands on a heart as big as yours." This broke the other Valsing guards up; they howled and bellowed at their comrade's remark.

"What creeps these guys are," Rian told Purpur, after they had resumed their inspection. "They'd be the life of the party on Flaigon. They could swap jokes with the Ysss for hours on end, and probably have the time of their miserable lives."

The star-pirate grew serious. "The only Greebans—outside of Ween—we've been in contact

with these days are old Vax and company; Ven Fenben and the rest of them. Those boys may have funny names, but they certainly play for keeps."

Purpur growled in response.

"Quiet there, *Tenoxatli,*" the guard jeered, "or you'll have the natives slicing each other up again." Once more, the Valsings howled with laughter.

"If these goons weren't going to do us a favor by harrassing Ylang-Ylang," Rian muttered, "I'd feel pretty much inclinded to slit their gizzards." Purpur nodded. "But," the buccaneer continued, "business before pleasure."

Then he sighed. "Ween's gonna be awfully upset when we get back to Yahwoo, and he finds out that I've blown that big bag of guts away. 'Cause I'm gonna settle with Vax Waxnax as soon as we touch down. I never could stand that dirty old man, and now I know why . . . But how will I ever make it up to Ween?"

"Red-beard," the guard behind them interrupted, "move along. You talk more than two old . . . "

Rian spun around the interrupted his interrupter. "One more crack out of you, fat-head, and I'm gonna blast your teeth so far down your throat that your dentist will have to launch an expedition to find 'em!" Of course, that broke the Valsings up completely. Rian turned away, his face a study in exasperation.

Bowing sarcastically to the guards, he grabbed Purpur and took him into the starship. As soon as they were inside, two new Valsings began to shadow them. Rian shook his head and pointed in the direction of the sick-bay.

They met Doctor Vana just as he was coming out of the intensive-care section. Rian noticed the grim expression on his face as they approached each other.

"What's the good word, doc?"

Doctor Vana shook his head. "Not so good, I'm afraid. Every day we spend on this place boosts the odds against Dann. If we don't get him proper care soon, it might be too late. There's not much time, skipper."

"I know," Rian replied. "Ween's finishing the scramblers tonight, and the Hazard'll be ship-shape tomorrow. Then we can get out of here."

"I hope so," the ship's surgeon told him. "I'm really worried about that boy."

As he went to the final briefing session on Yahwoo, Supreme Commander Ozain was optomistic. Captain Rian and his people were back in action, fully recovered from the strange virus they had contracted. And they would be going out in the Hazard tommorrow, when the invasion of Havanal would finally be launched. And Garthane himself would be going with them, to lead a hundred of the Fellowship's original members into battle.

Ylang's still sitting tight in Flaigon, Ozain thought, *so we'll take advantage of his inactivity and liberate another galaxy. Garthane's postponed the initiation of all the new members of the Fellowship on account of the Hazard's accident, but if our luck holds a little longer, it looks as though we won't need them this time out. And a few months of more training on Palos won't hurt them any, either.*

His face lit up as he recalled the morning's launching of the latest wave of probes. *The scramblers on those things are working like a dream,* he noted with satisfaction. *Not only have we saturated Havanal, but we've even managed to infiltrate ten galaxies beyond it.* As he entered the conference room, the guards at the door snapped to attention and presented arms. *If we can just*

stir up the captive populations in half those star-seas, the Dark Emperor had better hang on to his throne for dear life.

"Gentlemen. Ladies," the Supreme Commander of the League of Free Worlds said, as he sat down at the head of the long table, "Havanal awaits us . . . "

Quaarg saluted smartly, did an about-face, and marched out of the conference room, followed by the rest of the Ysss on the general staff. Blorg remained in his seat, watching his brother-reptiloids file out of the chamber. Deep in thought, he toyed with the reptiloid skull that sat on the black, micalite surface of the conference table. The thing represented the Devastator's one concession to sentimentality: it was the skull of the first higher life-form he had ever killed. Blorg kept it as a souvenir, a grisly memento of his initiation into the dark mysteries of death. It was the skull of the Ysss who had fathered him.

There will be a warm welcome in store for the League when we swoop down on them after they come out of hyperspace in Havanal, he soliloquized telepathically. *My Greeban agents have done their work well. This is the first time I have ever had the precise exit co-ordinates of an enemy starfleet.*

The lord of the Ysss rose from his chair and, tossing the skull in the air and catching it in his lower right hand, strolled out of the conference room. He turned and walked down the corridor that led to the Great Devourer's lair.

My flotilla will contain only five thousand ships when we engage the enemy . . . but a thousand of them will be invincible. We will burn the ships of the League to ashes, and then scatter those ashes across the void . . . Ylang's force-field consoles, expensive and difficult to

produce as they are, are certainly worth waiting for.

The unshielded ships I shall use as decoys, in order to whet the enemy's appetite for combat. Later in the engagement, we will interlock our force-fields and go streaking toward them, butchering the scum until the stars glow red with the color of blood.

Haaass-aaass-aaassss! The Blorg spluttered into the ghastly laughter of the Ysss, rocking from side to side as he walked. *Tomorrow will be such a glorious day,* he gloated, as he entered the lair. *Not only will the League of Free Worlds be dealt a terrible blow, but the Fellowship of Light will suddenly find itself leaderless at the same time. The doubles aboard the counterfeit Hazard have been programmed to assassinate that old fool, Garthane, before the battle is joined. Then my revenge will be complete. All that will remain to be done after that is to await the production of more consoles, so we can go into Taylos and Primula and put an end to these upstarts once and for all.*

Blorg was as happy as a humanoid child on its birthday. He prostrated himself before his lord and master, and gave the Dark Emperor the latest details of his battle-plan. When he arose, the lord of the Ysss was in such high spirits that he mentally (and unconsciously) hummed the great death-anthem of Sserp, the one reserved for the rarest and most dreadful of occasions.

My son's joy fills the throne-room, the Devourer boomed. *What fine horrors has he planned for the survivors of tomorrow's battle?*

There should be thousands of prisoners, O Lord of the Universe, Blorg replied cheerfully, hissing his snaky chuckle as he did. *I propose to bring them all before you at once and conduct a festival of torment in your honor. The energies liberated thereby should provide great Ylang with the finest banquet it has had in*

aeons.

The gluttonous Ylang flashed and burbled with excitement as it anticipated the feast. *My lord is so unselfish and sharing that he warms my heart. I consider myself fortunate above all creatures to have a son so dedicated to the pleasure and well-being of his old father.* The tyrant was in a sentimental mood. *Ask anything of me, sweet Blorg—anything at all in the whole of the starry firmament–and it shall be yours.*

I need nothing else, Father Ylang, the lord of the Ysss replied, *since all good things come from your dark embrace . . . and I have been blessed with that already.* Blorg groped for a further compliment, but it eluded him. Flowery speech was never one of his strong points. Suddenly he grew serious, as he thought of a request. *Mighty Ylang, I would ask one small thing of you: the answer to a question that has been troubling me for a long time, now.*

And what is that, my son?

The time when the late Captain Rian . . . (here Blorg paused to emit a series of hissing chuckles) *and the other humanoid garbage had the temerity to come here after the late lady Nila . . . how were they able to pass through Atmospheric Security undetected when they fled? . . . I know that the old ape, Garthane, used the Fellowship of Light's powers of mind to slip his vessle in and out of our air-space unheeded . . . But how was it possible for the Hazard to escape from here?*

Ylang-Ylang's plusating mass dimmed slightly while the star-tyrant thought for a moment, searching the near-infinite associative nexuses of its vast memory-banks. *The young humanoid,* it answered, *named Ween Leever invented an ingenious device known as a scrambler, which allowed the Hazard to escape detection.*

How did this device work, great Ylang?

To put it in the simplest terms, dear Blorg, the device literally scrambled the input of all scanning equipment on our vessels and then lost itself, transferring the Hazard's signals to a range well beyond those picked up on existing mechanisms.

Haaass! Blorg recoiled as he remembered the erratic behavior of the Scourge's readout screens the day he shot down the Hazard.

That is how it works in principle, Ylang continued. *For some unknown reason, the young humanoid's mind blurred the technical details, and I did not have time to pry them out . . . Sweet Blorg, you are distrubed. What troubles you?*

Father Ylang, the lord of the Ysss replied, *I think that I must return to Taylos immediately, and make a brief visit to the wasteworld known as X-8, Because I am not . . .*

What? Ylang interrupted, glowing like the heart of a volcano. *And miss the great battle?*

This is even more important to me, Father Ylang . . .

8 / A Day of Deadly Surprises

Cries of *On to Havanal*! and *Free Havanal*! went up in the air of a dozen worlds, as the liberation forces based in the Taylos galaxy made their way to the spaceports where the silver starships waited. The next stage of the long, hard journey to Flaigon had begun. Flags waved in the breeze, helmets gleamed in the sunlight; armies marched and crowds cheered; and the great host drawn from the star-fields of two galaxies held its hopes as high as its proud banners.

Insectoid crowds cheered: humming, buzzing, and droning as the sound of marching bands rose above the wide boulevards and dinned to the skies. Animaloid crowds cheered: yowling, howling, and bellowing as the machines of the ground forces lumbered and rumbled on their way to the startransports. Humanoid crowds cheered: roaring, hollering, and whistling as the bright armies filed into the starships.

The League of Free Worlds had never been in better shape. Volunteers from Taylos swelled it ranks, and the production of war-materials in Primula surpassed all forecast and expectations. In addition to this, an enormous amount of Dark Empire atmospheric craft, weapons, and equipment had fallen to the rebellious Taylians, and most of it had been converted to serve the

ends of the liberators.

Morale was never higher. The myth of imperial invincibility had been shattered, blunting the psychological edge of the enemy's sword. The Primulans, with many successful encounters and two galactic victories under their belts, had become seasoned veterans; and the Taylians (never a bunch to be called peaceful, even in the best of times) were up in arms and spoiling for a fight with anything that wore Ylang-Ylang's colors.

So off they went: bold, assured, and prepared; armed with the might of two powerful galaxies, and armored in the knowledge of the tactics and weaknesses of the enemy. Confidence hung in the air of those worlds with a density equal to that of their atmospheres. They were off and rolling; and the word was out that the slave legions and the hissing brood who served Ylang had better run for cover, because the free people of the allied worlds were on their way to liberate another galaxy!

Needless to say, Garthane's words of caution had about as much effect in the midst of all this tumult as harp notes in a crescendo at the finale of a symphony. The High Master had persistently warned the allies that Ylang was due to make its next move; but, since no one except Garthane really understood the true nature of the Dark Emperor, no one took his warnings to heart. Garthane was still disturbed about the strange incident concerning the Hazard and all aboard her; and he was far from certain that Ylang-Ylang could be discounted so easily . . .

The brazen war-trumpets of the Death Legion brayed their savage music of death and destruction in tones as cold and hard as Blorg the Devastator's heart. Jackboots pounded on the stones of Kordor, as the grim

force garrisoned there made its way to the spaceport that had risen to the surface of the black planet. Officers roared their orders throughout the basalt corridors; and the Mordling clones, locked securely away in their vaults, shrieked back at them with the stupefying voices of a chorus of fiends. Hisses shot through the artificial atmosphere like arrows from the bow of the god of vengeance, as the Ysss overlords double-timed their way through the Forbidden City; and when the mute reptiloids issued their telepathic commands, the air rang with the cries of minds as well as voices.

Alone in its lair, the Great Devourer smouldered fitfully, pondering the course of future events like an indecisive god in a long-abandoned temple. Immortality is no guarantee of sound judgment, and the Dark Emperor had its doubts. The latest move in the great galactic game had been a long time coming by the standards of mortal creatures, but to an entity that stares out over the seas of eternity, it was hardly more than the time it takes to blink an eye. Ylang trafficked in ages and aeons: millennia were days, centuries hours, and years mere seconds. Althought the Devourer lived in the here-and-now, part of it dwelt in the realm of eternity as well. And if on-the-spot decision concerning important matters are rarely easy for mortals, imagine the discomfort such things are capable of inflicting upon the superhuman.

The reek of brimstone permeated the lair as the Lord of Life and Death sputtered and belched like the belly of a dying volcano, its nervous system wracked by the flatulence of indecision. On one hand, the tyrant looked forward to the Havanal encounter with high anticipation, anxious to pluck the fruits of its labors and savor the sweet juices of its confirmed wisdom; on the other, it felt a constant gnawing inside, as the thousand sharp

teeth of anxiety nibbled away at the magic mushroom of confidence. Although Ylang regarded its imperial designs as a game, the game was far from child's play even for a being as awesome as itself—and the stakes were high.

If the Devourer overplayed its hand, so to speak, all resistance would crumble immediately; and the spectre of cosmic boredom that haunted the Dark Emperor's dreams and whistled behind its throne like a draft through a crack in the window of eternity would be free to descend on its brilliance with all the squalor of sunset over a strip-mine. But if the hand were underplayed, and the current move proved insufficient to retard the progress of the enemy, the result would be still another insult to the imperial presence and an open incitement to further rebellion.

The men and starships of the League of Free Worlds were as nothing to Ylang—mere cannon-fodder and beasts to be led to the slaughter, but the star-tyrant was genuinely distrubed when it appraised the role of the Fellowship of Light. After all, the wee, impudent mannikin who led the order had actually violated the sanctity of the lair, and lived to tell the tale—as jabbering humanoid primates will, the filthy, boastful little beasts! Garthane's move had been bold and incredibly courageous, the Great Devourer was forced to admit that. But, on the other hand, his action was also the equivalent of a monkey emptying its bowels on the high altar of a god . . . and Ylang could not permit such a flagrant act of disrespect to go unpunished.

The emperor, by virtue of information received from Blorg's Taylian agents, knew what the Fellowship of Light was up to on the surface of things. It knew that Garthane had recruited furiously, in an attempt to multiply the effect of the order's powers of mind. It knew

that the great initiation-ceremony had been postponed when Garthane went back to Yahwoo. And it knew that the substitution of the doubles and the replicated Hazard would throw the High Master's timetable even farther off schedule . . . Knowing all that, Ylang still worried about Garthane and his fellows.

Those two hundred old Primulans may have shattered the armada to smithereens, the tyrant thought, *but they'll have to shake down the very walls of the Infinite before they can penetrate the interlocked force-fields of my starships! And yet . . .*

BWOA-A-A-A-AAARP! The Devourer belched its distress, filling the immense stone chamber with swirling clouds of black and sulphurous smoke. Acid shock-waves broke over the walls, flaking the living rock and showering a hail of sparks and ashes on the floor. Ylang suffered from atomic indigestion as well as cosmic boredom.

If a mere two hundred of those old monkeys could summon up a tidal wave from the dark heart of the Infinite itself, the ruler of the Dark Empire thought nervously, *what would ten or twenty times their number be capable of doing?*

Thunder reverberated throughout the vast chamber and the air crackled and flashed like a thousand high-tension cables shorting-out, as the tyrant felt the first twinge of fear it had known in untold ages, an emotion as rare among immortals as teeth in the mouth of birds. Mortals believe that gods make their own luck; but Ylang, devoted gambler and student of the strange and mysterious ways of the Infinite, knew better. The old Mordling proverb summed up his feeling on the matter: *He who pins his hopes on luck often winds up with the point through his heart.*

Ylang-Ylang was afraid . . . and it enjoyed the feeling

thoroughly. And as fear ate its way into the Devourer's soul, Ylang exploded into a mushroom-cloud of ecstasy.

BAR-R-R-ROOOO-OOO-OOOOM! Ylang's great anxiety-explosion blew down the bronze doors of the lair and halted all preparation for war in the Forbidden City. Every living thing in Kordor was knocked to the ground by the blast. And not a soul rose after it had passed, so sure were the inhabitants that Doomsday had come. Even the dreadful Mordlings stopped howling milli-seconds before they fell flat on their faces, thumping and bumping on the stone floors, smacking the ground with the sound of a barrel of dropped whales. Humanoids stopped breathing. Animaloids stopped breathing. Insectoids stopped breathing. Even the Ysss stopped hissing.

Finally, boiling with annoyance like a crucible of radioactive isotopes, the Dark Emperor itself had to order the frightened souls of Kordor back to work. Silence fell like a shroud over the dead face of the Forbidden City as the trembling legions resumed their activities. The Ysss hissed as softly as new-born snakelets; and for once the horrendous Mordlings choked back their interminable nightmare screams. The center of the Dark Empire grew as quiet as the conscience of a robot.

Even the star-tyrant was quiet, startled into silence by the ferocious combustion of its ecstasies. It was several minutes before the Devourer dared to resume the flow of its thoughts.

How delightful! How horrible! How incredibly satisfying! Ylang thought. *Such a cosmic sensation! . . . I know of nothing to compare with it—murder, torture, domination, conquest. Ylang howled with rapture.*

When the after-effects of its ecstasy had evaporated,

Ylang returned to the problem at hand. *What if the Fellowship of Light is not crushed this time? What if those overweening little lumps of excrement actually manage to come to Flaigon once again? As far as I know—as far as I can tell—I am immortal. Indestructible . . . But what if—just what if—those mewling, puking little gobs of corruption could . . . hurt me? What if they could? . . . I forget what pain is like, but I remember that I never cared for it at all!*

Quaarg! Quaarg! Come here-immediately! the Devourer called frantically, regretting that Blorg had just departed on his anxious mission to X-8. But Quaarg would do. The young reptiloid had recently caught the emperor's attention, and impressed it with a glimpse of his potential. Quaarg represented the new breed. He was taller (the young ones all seemed taller to the emperor these days), bolder, stronger, faster, and sharper of mind than the older Ysss. He was a new twig on the branch of the reptiloids' accelerated evolution. Quaarg was worth watching, worth developing. Of course, if Blorg ever got wind of the youngling's potential, that twig would be snapped in two abruptly. But Blorg wouldn't last forever. And when he began to show signs of slowing down . . . Well, there is no such thing as an old Ysss. So . . .

Shuddering like gelatin on a vibrator-belt, all four hands covering his visored face, Quaarg stumbled hastily into the lair and fell prostrate before his lord and master. Absent-mindedly, Ylang realized why the young reptiloid had come into the throneroom unannounced; all of the mind-raped heralds who stood directly outside in the antechamber were buried beneath the great bronze doors, blown down in the throes of Ylang's ecstasy. But that was not important; there were more where they came from.

My master summons and his servant attends, Quaarg telepathed timidly, his brainwaves wobbling like a hallucination on an oscilloscope.

Yes, my boy, the Devourer answered gently, bypassing the pleasures of intimidation for the reassurance of clarity. *I desire you to perform a little errand for me.*

Master, ask the impossible—ask the unthinkable—and I will do it gladly! For mighty Ylang, I would enter into the jaws of Death himself . . . and return with his grinding teeth.

That's another thing, the Devourer thought privately. *This youngling has the gift of eloquence. Had Blorg attempted lines like those, he would have strangled to death on his own tongue. And Quaarg has a wit as sharp and sure as an executioner's blade. That is something that Blorg never possessed.*

Yes, sweet Quaarg, the Devourer purred mellowly, flicking out a dark tendril from the lower part of its mass and tickling the soles of the prostrate reptiloid's feet with a teaser of unholy ecstasy. Quaarg shivered uncontrollably, his body-armor rapping on the stones like the drum-roll that accompanies a march to the gallows. Ylang knew how to motivate its employees when it chose to.

Here is what I wish you to do, my little night-crawler . . .

A star-burst exploded in Quaarg's mind and melted over the corridors of his consciousness with the sticky and cloying sweetness of a bomb made of candy. Images flashed onto the screen of his setience, and Ylang was the projector.

He saw the vast realms of the Dark Empire—starting with the central point of Flaigon and the Morde galaxy telescope out and dissolve into different galactic seg-

ments, as the mental star-chart shifted its co-ordinates before his mind's eye. Each realm was marked by an overlay of shadow and the spiked-star insignia, both designations of imperial ownership. All the star-seas Quaarg viewed were marked in this fashion but one . . . and that was the one that suddenly zoomed into sharp focus in his mind.

See this place, sweet Quaarg? That is where you shall go . . . to deliver a little message for your father.

Holy Ylang, Quaarg blurted out telepathically, with the impulsiveness of youth, *this galaxy sits like a lone island in the otherwise unbroken sea of your possessions. It does not bear your stamp. Why does it remain free, my lord?*

You are quick in your perceptions, youngling, Ylang replied admiringly, *and your talents do not pass unnoticed. But that is more than you need to know at present. It is not relevant to your mission, so let your attention be directed elsewhere.*

I am the incarnation of Ylang's will, Quaarg replied humbly, impressing the tyrant with his attention to court etiquette.

That is good, my child. Very good. You will go to the place you have just seen and address the beings to whom I send the message I am about to imprint upon your consciousness.

The Hazard, or rather the replica of that good ship counterfeited by Ylang-Ylang's arts, was the first craft to lift off from Yahwoo as Operation Havanal began. Commander Ozain had granted this signal honor to the heroes of Primula in the interests of morale and liaison as the expedition lifted-off from a dozen worlds in Taylos. After all, Rian and his crew were all Taylians, and to represent the galaxy of Primula, Garthane, Dann

Oryzon, and the lady Nila of Aurea Solis were present as well. The joint-strategy of the League and the Fellowship was about to be implemented for the third time, as the bright ships took to the air. Watching the Hazard streak off, Supreme Commander Ozain and Brother Camenarpo, Garthane's second-in-command, nodded to each other and smiled.

"Two minutes to hyperspace entry," a computer-voice intoned monotonously throughout the Hazard. Garthane sat beside Dann, his features composed in their accustomed expression of serenity. Red Rian leaned back in the pilot's seat and looked over his shoulder at the High Master.

"No trance this time, Garthane?" he asked. "Think we're gonna take Havanal that easily?"

Garthane stared at Rian, a half-smile on his lips. "The trance will come later, Captain Rian." He noticed that Purpur darted a surprise look at him. Nila swivelled around in her seat to fact him, and Dann turned as well.

Rian left the controls to the felinoid, and spun his chair around in Garthane's direction. "That's too bad," he said, a strange, faraway look coming into his eyes.

"Somewhat unexpected," Nila added. Garthane turned to look at her, and saw the same cold look in her eyes. He looked into his son's eyes.

"We hadn't planned on that," Dann told him, his eyes now as empty as those of his companions.

"I don't understand," Garthane replied. "What does my entering into a mind-lock have to do with your . . . plans?" As he said this, Dann smiled a smile as cold and cruel as a shipwreck in an arctic sea.

"Because, Garthane," Red Rian answered, "It would have been much simpler to ice you in that state." The High Master saw the pirate's hand move at his side, and when he looked down he was staring into the black

mouth of a zapper.

He glanced at the others, and saw the same grim sight.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, in level, measured tones.

His eyes as cold as the grave, Red Rian grinned the most evil grin that Garthane had ever seen. "We're going to kill you . . . ""*Commander Ozain*," the co-pilot shouted in the League's flagship, "*Look at the screens! We're losing contact with Captain Rian's ship! . . .*"

BOO-WHOOO-O-OOOSH! The Scourge's outer-plating flared like an incendiary-rocket as the starship burst into the atmosphere of X-8 at maximum entry speed. *Scramber! Scramber!* The word rang out and repeated over and over in Blorg's mind like a shout in an echo-chamber. *Damn the light, damn the day!* Blorg swore, hissing with anxiety as he activated the long-range scanners. Rian was space-scum and a hairy, humanoid ape, but he was no fool. What if he *did* activate the device that had once enabled him to slip through the massive security force that guarded Flaigon? What if he had been able to simulate that great explosion and crash-land on X-8? What if he and Nila and Dann Oryzon and all the others were still alive?

Womp! Blorg smashed his black-gloved fist down on the control console, causing the reptiloid who sat beside him to straighten up like a shot. The Devastator had just given the order to activate the metal-detectors when his co-pilot spoke up.

Two starships approaching, my lord. They just lifted-off from X-8, and are headed right for us.

Haaass! Could one of them be the Hazard? Blorg doubted it. It had been days since he shot the starship

down, and if Rian had been at all able, he would have long since limped back to League Headquarters on Yahwoo. But Blorg's Taylian spies had reported nothing of the sort. Only the cloned doubles were there, having been "rescued" when the counterfeit Hazard was spotted.

And they should have completed their mission a few minutes ago, the lord of the Ysss thought, *shortly after the invasion force left for Havanal. That old fool, Garthane, should be dead by now . . .*

Blorg watched the two blips enter the grid of the naviscren. *Activate I.D. scanner,* he ordered, *and give me the details on those two ships.*

The co-pilot nodded and depressed a series of keys on the console. An amber flash lit up one of the screens before him as the identity read-outs appeared on the lines of its grid.

Blorg leaned over and depressed the keys that activated the Scourge's force-field. He looked out the front window-panel and watched as the silver nimbus, faint now in the harsh light of X-8's glaring sun, began to spread over the bow of his starship. He didn't know who the intruders were, but he intended to waste little time disposing of them.

The lord of the Ysss felt the cold thoughts of his co-pilot slither into his mind. *Two ships-of-the-line, my lord. Of old Taylian make, from sector nine of that galaxy. Well-armed and well-shielded. Probably of Valsing manufacture.*

Womp! Blorg's fist slammed down on the console again. *Valsings!* he thought, in a fit of annoyance. *How in the name of the pit can those be Valsing ships?* he barked mentally. *I destroyed them all when I irradiated their homeworld.* This made him think of the order he gave to irradiate Urgel . . . Red Rian's homeworld.

That is positive identification, Lord Blorg, the co-pilot informed him. The two blips had almost reached the center of the screen.

Decelerate to Mach one-point-five, Blorg ordered. He switched on the Scourge's intercom and transmitted his thoughts. *Stand by, all hands. Enemy approaching off the starboard bow. I don't have time to play with these fools, so hit them with everything you've got. Once they have been destroyed, we will go down to X-8 . . .*

From the edge of the clearing, Red Rian watched the Scourge blow the first Valsing ship out of the sky. He scowled as he turned to face Ordlar. "Damn it! I told you not to engage that ship. That's Blorg, all right, and he's come back looking for the Hazard."

The burly Valsing tugged at his beard, deep in thought. "Zeif!" he called out, suddenly raising his head. His wife emerged from the Hazard and ran to his side. "Here is what we must do, Zeif Ysss-killer," Ordlar said. "This is a rare chance to avenge our people and settle the blood-debt in full. Blorg is up there. He has come to pay Red-beard a little visit. He shall find him." The Valsing grinned wickedly. "And you shall find him, my love . . . and send him on a one-way trip to the depths."

Zeif's pale blue eyes glittered like ice floes in the sunlight; she nodded and smiled the bloodthirsty smile of the Valsings.

"You will take a quarter of the crew," Ordlar told her, and prepare a fitting welcome for the scaly beast." Rian noticed that Zeif was breathing heavily; it looked as if she were becoming physically aroused by the thought of blood. "I will take the others," Ordlar went on, "and, using the boy's scrambler-device, escape

from Azitlin." Zeif nodded again, still smiling that cruel smile.

"And then I will make my last voyage . . . to Flaigon," Ordlar told her. "Where I will bring the Dark Emperor's walls down on his head."

Oh, brother, Rian thought, shaking his head. *Are you in for a surprise!*

Ordlar turned away from Zeif and pointed a finger up at Purpur. "And you—*Tenoxatli*," he growled, sneering the Valsings' highly-developed sneer of contempt. "You must excuse me if I beg off from our schedule engagement, but I have more pressing business. Perhaps in another life . . . "

Tenoxatli snarled at him. But he, too, had other fish to fry. Rian sighed with relief. *Facing Blorg is bad enough*, he thought, *without having to waste prêcious time disposing of this death-oriented goon.*

Ordlar turned to his wife and hugged her. Then they kissed as tenderly as young lovers. And when they had parted from their embrace, Ordlar said, "We will meet on the other side of the stars."

Humanoid nature is the damnedest thing, Rian philosophized. *It even allows butchers to get romantic every now and then.*

Ordlar turned to Rian and held out his hand. The two men clasped forearms, Valsing-style. "You're on your own, Red-beard. Go back and liberate Havanal after Zeif presents you with a snake-skin."

Not if I see Blorg first, Rian thought, grinning at the couple. "Good luck, kids," he said, as they hurried off. "And good hunting!"

"Death will work overtime this day," Zeif yelled back over her shoulder, just before she and Ordlar ducked into the Valsing ship. Overhead, the Scourge sent the second ship down in flames.

Rian grabbed Purpur's arm and pulled him in the direction of the Hazard. "Wow," he said. "You'd think those two were getting set to go to a birthday banquet." Purpur growled at the thought of Ordlar, and shook his leonine mane. "Save it for old bonehead," Rian told him as they entered the Hazard.

"Ween! Ween Leever!" Rian bellowed, as soon as he was inside the ship. Ween's frizzy blond head popped up from behind the control-console. "Weenie-boy," the pirate said, "how soon can you get us shipshape?"

Blorg watched the blip that represented Ordlar's ship enter the screen. His four fists thundered down on the console with the sound of a demented storm-god's drum. *Damn it! How many of them must I blast out of the skies before I can land this stinking ship? They must be using the filthy place as a hide-out.* The delay had put the Devastator in a foul mood.

That's the last scanner reading I get, Lord Blorg, the co-pilot replied.

What about the detectors?

Two possibles, but I'm not even sure they're star-ships. Could be ore-formations or slag-heaps. It's hard to say.

One of them may be an ore formation, the lord of the Ysss replied. *But the other one has to be the Hazard—I'm sure of that!* He studied the blip on the screen before him. *Prepare to engage!* He leaned over and squinted into the master-gunsight for the bow-section and lined up the enemy in its cross-hairs.

Haaa-aa-aaass! Suddenly the electronic image disappeared. *The read-outs are going haywire!* the co-pilot exclaimed, his thought-voice strident in Blorg's mind.

Scramblers! Scramblers! The lord of the Ysss hissed like a three-G cooker. *There's only one ship they could*

have got a scrambler from—the Hazard's got to be down there!

Maybe the Valsings killed Rian, the co-pilot ventured, *and all that's left down there are his bones.*

Well, I want them for my walls! Blorg shouted telepathically, slapping the co-pilot on the side of his helmet. *And I'll drink my wine out of his skull tonight, if that's the case. Take us down—now!*

"The Hazard's gone, sir," Ozain's co-pilot told him. "Captain Rian just scrambled and took off. I've lost all trace of the ship."

Ozain bent over and cupped his head in his hands. *Here we are,* he thought, *on our way to liberate an occupied galaxy and all of a sudden the Hazard disappears taking Rian and Garthane with it, at the time we need them most.*

He turned to the man with the face of a serene hawk. "Camenarpo," he growled, in a deep voice that rasped like sandpaper on the bottom of a barrel, "What the hell is going on here?"

Flying low over the stone pyramids, the Scourge opened fire with its laser-cannon, blasting the priests off the high alters and scattering the crowds on the ground below. Blorg stared at the forward vidscreen and watched the panic-stricken inhabitants of Azitlin bolt for the cover of the rain forest.

I've spotted a ship, the co-pilot told him, *and it looks like the Hazard, my lord. Over there, off to the side of the pyramids.*

Haaass! Blorg sat up in his seat. *Take her down now,* he ordered. *Touch down at the opposite end of that row of pyramids. We're going hunting . . . "*

Quaarg paced the quarter-deck on his starship, the Malice, driven by a metabolism accelerated by the electricty of ambition. He ducked through the hatch on his left, and turned to enter his cabin. Once inside, he walked over to the far wall and stood before a large, black locker. Its door swung open when Quaarg interrupted its photo-beam lock with a wave of his hand. A large lumi-mirror on the inside of the door activiated and Quaarg stepped back to admire himself in it, all four arms akimbo as he struck a haughty pose.

Taller than Blorg, he thought. *Handsomer than Blorg. Trimmer than Blorg. Younger—much younger—than Blorg*. He studied his reflection for a moment, then saluted smartly and bowed. When he straightened up, Quaarg was hissing with satisfaction. He was much impressed with himself, and fully aware as his ship sped toward the mysterious galaxy of the signal honor accorded him by the Dark Emperor. It meant that Ylang was grooming him to be Blorg's eventual successor . . . the new lord of all the Ysss.

Quaarg shivered as he recalled the dark whisper of ecstasy Ylang had touched him with back in the lair. He looked forward eagerly to the murderous delirium that would one day be his by right. It would take some time before it was his, but he could wait. Reptiloids were very good at waiting.

However, if Blorg realized what Ylang had in mind, he would never rest until his rival was out of the way. *But I am under the Devourer's protection*, Quaarg thought confidently, *and Blorg will not find out . . . until it is too late.*

The future looked bright. Quaarg was so happy at that moment he could have drunk cold blood instead of warming it in the proper Ysss fashion.

But one thing puzzled the young reptiloid: Why was

Ylang-Ylang so secretive concerning the unknown beings who ruled the strange galaxy? How did they ever remain free—a lone island in the vast sea of imperial domination? And what was the Great Devourer's relationship to these mysterious entities?

No sense worrying about that, now, Quaarg thought. *I'll have more input soon enough.* He raised his lower left arm and looked at the intergalactic metrochronometer on his wrist, the pressure of his attention illuminating the read-outs on its face. *Hmmm. It won't be long before our starfleet engages the ships of the League on the rim of Havanal . . .*

After the first wave of Death Legion commandos had debarked and formed a defense perimeter around the ship, Blorg thundered down the Scourge's flexiladder. In his upper hands he held a high-gamma laser-rifle of magnum caliber; holstered at his sides were two huge zappers, safeties off and set at maxi-blast. He paced back and forth impatiently as the rest of his party filed out of the ship and formed into ranks on the edge of the clearing. His eyes travelled over the long row of stone pyramids that stretched out before him. There was no sign of activity whatsoever. He turned around and peered into the thick underbrush of the rain forest. From a reptiloid's point of view, it was a good place to go hunting.

All present and accounted for, my lord, the Ysss who was his second-in-command told him. Blorg turned and surveyed the ranks. Five hundred Death Legion commandos, mostly animaloid and insectoid, and five Ysss officers: more than sufficient to hunt down Rian and his companions. He anticipated no difficulty whatever in dealing with the runty humanoid savages who inhabited the straw huts and primitive masonry buildings that

stood behind the far end of the row of pyramids.

The ones we miss on the ground, he thought, *I will order wiped out from the air. Two low-yield missiles—the dirty ones with the fifty-year half-life—should do the job nicely.*

He sniffed the air like someone inhaling the perfume of a familiar and well-loved flower. Blorg identified the scent that had caught his attention as the reek of blood—humanoid blood. He was beginning to feel at home on X-8. *Perhaps I won't destroy this crude culture. Then I could return, and do some hunting. The place might turn out to be a veritable paradise.*

Blorg turned away from the troops and activated the infrared scanner he held in his lower right hand, sweeping the green wall of foliage at the edge of the clearing. As the scanner swept an area to the right, the device crackled excitedly, indicating the presence of a concentrated number of life-forms.

Blorg handed the device to the scanner-tech at his side as the other Ysss activated their scanners. *Scouts out!* he commanded. *We'll start in there . . .*

9 / A Great Battle Lost

"Greetings to all the races of this galaxy, from the League of Free Worlds and the Fellowship of Light. We bring glad tidings to the subject peoples of the Dark Empire. The great armada that entered Primula has been utterly destroyed; and the galaxy of Taylos has already been liberated. Rise up and join us! Rise up and throw off the chains of your slavery!

"The oppressor can be overthrown! Stand together, and your numbers are great; the occupation forces are small in comparison to the populations they control. The Dark Empire can be defeated—we have already proved that. Rise up and join us . . . freedom awaits you!"

The pre-recorded message played over and over as the probe streaked through the atmosphere of its target-world. Undetectable by virtue of its scrambler, the silver dart sped on, overlaying its signal on the frequencies of all active communications systems.

On the surface below, imperial technicians sweated and cursed as they vainly attempted to jam the transmission of the phantom message. Squadrons of black fighters buzzed through the air like angry hornets, their pilots shaking their heads in frustration each time they glanced at the empty screens on the instrument panel. Cruisers and destroyers swung in orbit outside the at-

mosphere, the baffled technicians within them having no more success in locating the origin of the seditious message than their fellows on the ground.

In the captive cities, black-uniformed troops hefted their rifles nervously and darted anxious glances at the startled, listening crowds. Communications officers tore their hair and bawled out their subordinates, unable to filter out the inflammatory incitement and unwilling to suspend communications with the other stations in the intraplanetary network.

Panic and confusion settled like a cloud of poison gas on the bases of the Dark Empire in ten great galaxies . . .

"The readings indicate that subjects are scattering and retreating, my Lord," the scanner-tech informed the lord of the Ysss as the Death Legion commandos advanced through the underbrush of the rain forest, using de-vitalizer beams to wither the choked and tangled vegetation that impeded their progress.

Quadrant formation! the Dark Emperor's favorite ordered. *Maintain pursuit of the fugitives in your respective sectors. Fire on sight, and shoot to kill. If any of you sight Red Rian and his companions, I want to be notified immediately.*

Blorg watched the troops in front of him fan out like a cloud of black locusts. The deeper they went into the jungle, the darker it became, as the trees that towered above them grew together ever more densely, blocking out the light of the sun. This posed no problem for a reptiloid like Blorg, who could see equally well in bright sunlight or dim caves, but the other soldiers were finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish the objects that lay ahead of them.

Yaaa-a-a-aaah! Screams rang out on the Devastator's left, and were answered by a tumult of shrieks, roars, and chatters, as the animals of the rain forest set up a chorus of fright and defiance. Blorg made his way up to the source of the disturbance, slithering between trees and lianas as noiselessly as a snake.

Haaass! He was unprepared for what he saw. A score of the commandos had blundered into a huge pit that had been camouflaged after it was dug in the ground; they all lay writhing and screaming at its bottom, impaled on wooden stakes whose sharpened points were covered with their blood. Blorg hissed his annoyance at the thought of having to contend with the savages who inhabited the rain forest.

Thoop: Thoop: A shower of arrows rained down on the expedition. Clawing at the shafts that protruded from their necks and bodies, uttering shrill, gurgling cries, more than forty of the commandos fell to the ground. The others milled around in confusion, squinting into the darkness, hoping for a glimpse of the hidden enemy.

"They're up in the trees!" the scanner-tech shouted, just as the unseen bows *thrummed* again in the upper register of death. *Blong*! A flint arrowhead bounced off the Devastator's breastplate, its impact sending him back against the bole of a huge tree.

Open fire! he bellowed telepathically. *Whaang! Whaang*! *Whang*! Laser-beams lit up the gloom as the commandos sprayed their fire overhead. *Aaaaah*! Humanoid screams resounded throughout the area, and the men of Azitlin dropped from the trees like fruit scorched by a lightning bolt.

The scanner-techs called out directions and the lasers flared and whined again, igniting the trees with their fiery touch. Sheets of flame leaped to the sky, and the

dark surroundings grew as bright as noon on the ocean. *Kill them all—every one of them!* Blorg ordered. And the lasers whined their death-song until all traces of activity disappeared from the scanner screens.

The lord of the Ysss surveyed the area, his one-way visor reflecting the light of the bright, flickering fire. After reckoning his dead, he studied the scorched remains of the Azitlini. *Damn little pests!* he swore. *Over a hundred of my troops dead, and not a trace of Rian yet.*

"All clear, Lord Blorg," the scanner-tech advised him. "Enemy presence in the vicinity is nil."

The Devastator nodded. *Those tree-climbing runts will pay dearly for this*, he vowed. *I'll come back here and irradiate the whole, stinking planet.*

Back to the clearing, he ordered.

"They're coming out of hyperspace, Admiral—and right on target!"

In the control-center of the imperial flagship, Carnage, Admiral Venaam hissed with satisfaction and turned to the navi-screen, where he saw the blip-clusters that represented the star-fleet of the League of Free Worlds appear and head toward the center of the grid overlay. He leaned over the console and switched on the intrafleet communicator.

Attention all ships of the first wave. Prepare to engage the enemy. Open fire at a range of one-two-five—repeat: one-two-fiver telemikrons. Hold your fire until then. That is all.

Stand by, Venaam ordered the Ysss at the controls of the force-field console.

Although he knew that Ylang's new force-field would protect his ship and the others that constituted the rear-guard of the flotilla, the High Admiral of the Ha-

vanal spacenavy was nervous. The enemy out numbered him by a ratio of three to one, and this fact made the reptiloid uneasy on an instinctive level. Dark Empire tactics in space were relatively simple, those of the juggernaut: swamp and destroy. It was the first time in his entire career as a star-fighter that the Admiral had ever been on the short end of the odds, and it made him uncomfortable, But he was not afraid; the Ysss fear only one thing in life . . . Ylang-Ylang.

"Effective range four-seven-five telemikrons," intoned the computer voice.

Venaam glanced at the navi-screen again. *This will be a great victory*, he thought. *The League's liberation force will be devastated, and half the existing members of the Fellowship of Light will be wiped-out.*

"Effective range four-seven-five telemikrons," intoned the computer voice.

It is well that Blorg is not with the fleet as we enter the engagement, the admiral thought, screening his thoughts from the other Ysss in the control-center. *This way, the full credit for the victory will go to me. I shall be the hero of the day. And someday I shall be transferred to the emperor's court as Kordor. Blorg will not live forever. I shall see to that . . .*

"Effective range four-five-oh telemikrons."

One day I shall become lord of all the Ysss, and share Ylang's unspeakable ecstasies . . .

"Enemy force approaching at three-seven five telemikrons," a computor-voice droned over the speakers of Supreme Commander Ozain's flagship, the Aurea Solis.

Ozain leaned over the control-console and activated the communicator. "Attention all starships. Prepare to engage the enemy. All forward ships into wedge forma-

tion. Fire at will when optimum range is achieved. All flanking and rear-guard ships to stand by. That is all."

Stroking his bald head, he leaned back and studied the navi-screen. *What the hell could have happened to Rian and Garthane?* he wondered to himself. *How could they disappear like that, right at the outset of the invasion of Havanal?* He brought his hand up to his mouth and started gnawing on his thumbnail a sure sign that he was disturbed.

A moment later, he removed his hand from his mouth and turned to the gaunt, hawk-faced man who sat beside him. "Camenarpo," he said gently. "Why did Rian and Garthane disappear just before we went intp hyperspace?"

"Enemy force at three-oh-oh telemikrons," the computer-voice interrupted.

"I don't know yet, Commander," Brother Camenarpo replied softly. "Garthane must have had an idea at the last moment."

"I certainly hope so," Ozain said, wiping away the droplets of sweat the had begun to form on his upper lip. "Something's going on . . . and it worries me."

"Lord Blorg, I've picked up something big on the metal detector!" the technician informed the Devastator, as the commandos emerged from the rain forest. "Over there—behind that pyramid."

Haaass! Blorg smiled behind his visor as he studied the screen of the detector. A mass of metal that large could only be a starship.

Split up into two column of equal size, he ordered. *Go between these two pyramids, and then spread out and encircle the object at a distance of one hundred yards.*

As the commandos split up into two detachments,

Blorg held his rifle to one side and loosened the Zappers in their holsters. In his mind's eye, the lord of the Ysss saw himself mounting a new batch of skulls on the walls of his apartments in Kordor.

He watched the black-uniformed soldiers file around the sides of the pyramid and head toward the clearing beyond. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the jungle blazing where the lasers had sprayed their beams. Roaring tongues of flame hissed and spat at the skies, licking the topmost branches of the trees, crumbling green foliage into black ash. All around the clearing, Blorg heard the creatures of the rain forest raise their voices in a cacophany of panic as the fire, fanned by a rising wind, consumed everything that stood in its path.

The lord of the Ysss was so intent on spotting his prey that he barely noticed the stepped walls of the pyramids that towered above him on both sides. In fact, every soul in the expedition was so intent on spotting the fugitives that not a single one of them realized that they were being observed from the pyramids.

Suddenly, Blorg heard a voice—a woman's voice—cry out above him. And then, fifty voices responded with the same cry. Blorg gasped as the image of an irradiated world flashed onto the screen of his mind, and he realized that the ferocious cry was the war-whoop of the Valsings!

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! The area lit up as laser-bolts lanced down from the sides of the flanking pyramids like a concentration of lightning, scorching the hard-packed earth and the soldiers who stood upon it. Trapped in the withering cross-fire, Blorg threw himself to the ground and crawled for the safety of a ledge that jutted out from the wall nearest to him. As the searing beams rained down all around him, Blorg rolled under the ledge and slammed into the base of the stone

wall that stood three feet within its shadow, knocking the breath out of his body for an instant.

When he got his breath back, the lord of the Ysss crawled to the edge of the shadow and looked up at the pyramid across the way. A group of Valsings hung over its stepped sides, blasting away like maniacs at the trapped commandos who crouched on the open ground and frantically returned their fire.

Blorg cursed the Valsings in his thoughts as he lined one of them up in his gunsight. *Whaang*! The rifle whined and the bolt darted upward; a moment later, a smoking body dropped to the earth with a thud that could barely be heard above the sounds of combat. *Whaang! Whaang*! Blorg fired again, and blew another Valsing off the ledge in the hail of flying stone.

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! The Valsings spotted him and returned his fire. A blast of sweltering energy blew him back into the shadows and slammed him against the wall, the varnish on his smoking body-armor flaking into ashes.

Casting his melted rifle aside and beating out the flames that blazed on his gloves, Blorg reached for his zappers. His troops were falling on all sides, littering the ground with their charred bodies, half of them already out of action. A few moments more, and they'd be totally decimated. He crawled back to his former position and started to blaze away at the Valsings.

BOOM! BOOM! Two great explosions shook the ground. Blorg looked up and saw, to his surprise—that there were no more Valzings on the side of the opposite pyramid. Great sections of the walls had been blown away. Blorg rejoiced in his fierce heart as he realized what had happened: someone had brought the homing-robots up from the Scourge!

A series of explosions shook the area, and Blorg saw

chunks of stone sail through the air as the pyramid above him trembled violently. Cautiously, he stuck his head out of the shadows and looked in the direction of the Scourge, where he could see the squat robots advancing slowly on their rollers, bending forward periodically to launch another volley of missiles.

Then Blorg heard the brazen war-trumpets sound the all-clear. He scrambled out of his hiding-place and got to his feet. After that, the reptiloid looked around and surveyed the scene.

Smoke covered the area, issuing from the ground at the pitted sides of the pyramids. The dead lay sprawled all over the packed earth, frozen in ghastly poses, smoking and crackling from the small fires that still smouldered on their bodies. Helmets had been melted to slag; armor ran to the ground in steaming rivulets; burnt flesh sizzled on blackened bones. The hand of death had the place in its grip, and its touch was as hot as a thermal-poker.

Have the Valsings been totally annihilated? Blorg asked.

"I picked up traces in that direction, my lord," the animaloid tech replied, nodding to the right as he brushed the ashes off the face of his scanner. "Two or three of them must have escaped. No more than that. They must have headed for the jungle."

Or the Hazard, Blorg thought, as he gave the signal to advance.

Once out of the smoking alley between the pyramids, Blorg turned in the direction of the object on the metal-detector. He saw two more pyramids before him, on a line with the one he had just left. Beyond them he saw a starship, the plating on its hull gleaming with the flush of the setting sun, glowing like a smouldering fire on the hard brown earth. It was the Hazard!

Blorg turned to the non-com on his left, and took the insectoid's laser-rifle. He checked its setting,and then gave the signal to advance . . .

All hell broke loose on the rim of the Havanal galaxy as the starships of the Dark Empire and the League of Free Worlds lasers blazing, torpedos streaking, reactors roaring, met head-on in a life-and-death collision.

In the control-center of the Aurea Solis, Commander Ozain watched the screens on the console with grim satisfaction. Thanks to Rian's hit-and-run tactics, Ween's beefing-up of the weaponry, and the dare-devil brilliance of their pilots, the bright ships were slicing through the first wave of enemy ships like a microwave blade entering a piece of soft, Malian cheese.

Smaller than their adversaries, but heavily-weaponed and shielded for their size, the League's starships darted in and out of the line of black behemoths, inflicting heavy damage and sustaining light losses. The void was ablaze with the light of lasers, torpedo trails and multi-megation explosions; the spectacle looked like Death's own light-show. Beams shook, decks heaved and defense-screens buckled, as the two spacefleets contended for the title to Havanal.

This is going to be easier than I ever imagined, Ozain thought, as he watched the decimation of the imperial forces. *Looks like we've caught Ylang-Ylang off-guard again. There's just one thing that doesn't jibe: Whatever gave them the nerve to engage us when we outnumbered them three-to-one?* He was shortly to discover the answer to that question.

Admiral Venaam stared with lidless eyes at the screens on the Carnage's control-sonsole, and cursed his star-pilots and their lumbering vessels. The enemy was out-fighting and out-maneuvering his starships.

The first wave of his attack-force was almost totally demolished.

How did they ever manage to rig-out craft as light as those with such heavy shielding and weaponry? he soliloquized irritably. *There must be a few geniuses in the League's tech-dromes. I wish we had just one . . . then we wouldn't have to lose so damned many starships.*

Venaam's stern expression brightened beneath his one-way visor. *Ah, but we do! Emperor Yland has seen fit to bless us with the bounty of Mordling superscience. And it is time to activate the force-fields!*

He turned away from the screens and activated the communicator. *This is Admiral Venaam, speaking to all ships-of-the-line equipped with force-field consoles. Stand by to activate . . .*

"Carmenarpo—d'you see that silver glow encircling those ships to the rear?" Ozain asked. The hawk-faced man beside him nodded. "Ever see anything like it before?" Camenarpo shook his head. "What in the name of the infinite can it be?" the commander went on, rubbing his shining dome as he stared at the forward screens. "I don't know," Garthane's second-in-command replied. "But I expect we shall find out soon enough."

Ozain watched with fascination as a silver nimbus spread from one ship to another, enfolding them all within the widening circle of its luminescence. He leaned forward and threw open the key of the communicator-mike.

"Commandor Ozain to all ships-of-the-line. Triangulate your squadrons according to plan Delta, and go in to take out the remainder of the enemy force. I don't know what that silver glow means, but I'm willing to bet it's got something to do with an improved type of shielding. So gang-up on them; go in paired and tripled-up,

and hit them with everything you've got!"

Here they come! Animated by expectation, Admiral Venaam's thoughts slithered through his mind as ardently as an aroused Ysss making his way down to the mating-caves of Sserp. *Now they will be humbled*, he gloated.

According to the plan, his ships decelerated and set up the enemy in their gunsights. Venaam, his flagship forming the exact center of the silver circle, chuckled happily as the bright ships came forward in twos and threes. *Perfect! Perfect*! he exclaimed. *I've got them right where I want them*.

He withheld the order to fire, even though the enemy had come within effective range. *Death make you welcome, fools*, Venaam gloated, intoning the ritual formula of his people.

The void grew brighter as the League's starcraft opened fire, streaking at the circle of ships before them.

Open fire, High Admiral Venaam ordered, as matter-of-factly as if he were selecting an item for his breakfast menu.

Ozain couldn't believe his eyes as he watched the spectacle of destruction on the vidscreen. Even Camenarpo grunted and leaned forward in his seat. The enemy force was practically at a dead-halt now, disregarding defensive maneuvers and firing away with everything on boards its huge vessels, blowing the bright ships to fragments of metal that hissed as they hurtled through the void.

The bright ships came in again and again, making pass after pass, sustaining great losses as the hovering vessels poured out storms of laser-bolts and hails of proton-torpedos.

Bam! Ozain slammed his fist down on the control-console. "That's impossible! They're not breaking

formation! They're not even taking a single hit—and they're tearing our ships apart!"

"Order them out," said Brother Camenarpo, a sad look on his face. "It is time for the Fellowship to use its powers of mind."

Venaam laughed hysterically as he watched the bright ships withdraw. A third of the force had already been enfolded in the flaming grip of death, and he hadn't even given the order to advance. On the forward long-range scanner he saw the hundred ships that held the members of the Fellowship of Light begin to advance, the rest of the spacefleet re-forming around them in a defensive pattern.

Now, he thought, *it is the turn of the Fellowship*. He gave the order to advance.

Camenarpo came out of his trance-state with a start. He stared at the vidscreen in disbelief. *The mind-lock had failed*! He and the other brothers and sisters of the Fellowship had summoned the Infinite to churn up the energies at the very heart of the matter and send them breaking like a tidal wave over the backs of the Dark Empire starships . . . but nothing had happened! The enemy vessels just bobbed and danced on the seething ocean of energy like beach-balls swept up by an incoming tide.

"We've got to get out of here," Ozain said, as he saw the thousand invincible ships streak toward his force on the screens. "As it is, they'll blow half of us away before we get into hyperspace."

Camencarpo took a deep breath before he spoke. "There is one more thing we can try." Then he sat back in his seat, his eyes rolling up in his head as he entered the mind-lock once more.

Concentrate all your powers on the enemy flagship, he told the other members of his order, *and on the*

starships at the head of each of the approaching squadrons. We will attempt to penetrate their shields with our thoughts. His body relaxed in his seat. His face was radiant with the bright ecstasy of those who enter into communion with the heart of the living universe. He began to concentrate and focus his mind.

S-s-s-s-s-s . . . The Ysss who sat at the controls startled the admiral with his eerie, whistling hiss. Then, with the jerky movements of a robot with faulty circuits, the Ysss leaned over the controls and began to press a series of keys, feeding a new program into the Carnage's computer-system. If Venaam had seen the blank stare behind the reptiloid's one-way visor, he would have been alarmed.

What are you doing? he asked the pilot, after watching his actions uncomprehendingly for a moment. The pilot said nothing, but merely continued programming, all the while hissing the eerie, mismerized hiss.

Stop that, you fool—stop that immediately! Venaam screamed telepathically, as he realized what the pilot was actually doing. *Stop it*! he screamed again, clawing at the pilot's rigid arms, unable to stop him. *You're backing up our reactors*!

It was the strangest explosion that Ozain had ever seen. Once its reactors went into critical overload, the starship went up like a supernova, with all the furious unleashing of energy attendant upon such a transformation. But the whole process was contained with the oval of the silver halo that surrounded the vessel. Then, when the ship had been consumed, the force-field dissipated and dissolved into the blackness of deep space.

Ozain had plenty of time to study the phenomenon, because it was repeated with each of the squadron leader's starships.

One after the other, violent yet contained explosions

flared, the silver halos that enclosed them disappearing seconds after the starships were consumed.

Immediately following this, the on-rushing force of huge black vessels veered off-course, scattering to disappear in the distance.

"It will take them some time to re-group," Camenarpo said through his serene smile.

Ozain nodded. The Dark Empire force was leaderless now and flexibility and initiative in such situations was never a strong point among the black-uniformed legions. "Time enough for us to make it into hyperspace and return to Taylos," he said.

The Supreme Commander didn't feel like stretching his luck. If the enemy re-grouped and came at them again, he didn't know whether the Fellowship could handle so many of them at the same time. *I'd better play it safe*, he thought, *and get my people out of here while I can*.

After thanking Camenarpo, he gave the order to retreat with a heavy heart. *The League has lost its first battle*, he thought bitterly, *the Battle of Havanal*.

As Blorg's detachment filed around toward the Hazard's starboard side, the second column of Death Legion commandos headed in the opposite direction to complete the encirclement of the starship. Behind them the rain forest blazed and back-lighted the soldiers eerily; birds and animals screeched and roared as the fire spread in all directions, fanned by the shifting winds.

The lords of the Ysss advanced, the green wall of foliage on his right as he approached the Hazard's far side. The sun was setting rapidly, dropping like a stone in the west, it seemed to Blorg, and darkness was almost upon them. He stepped up his pace.

When he had extended his sight-line past the end of

the Hazard, Blorg saw a large group of humanoids standing in a group, all with their hands over their heads in the posture of surrender. He halted and looked at them, squinting as he strained his eyes recognized the familiar faces. The lady Nila. The felinoid. The boy who had invented the scrambler. And the man whose death was a year-and-a-half overdue . . . Red Rian.

They appeared to be waiting for him as they stood there outside the bright ship. But Blorg remembered what happened on Astyx, the last time Rian surrendered to the forces of the Dark Empire. That little game had cost the lives of nearly half a brigade of Death Legion commandos. No, there would be no tricks this time . . .

Just as his troops came up beside him, Blorg saw the Taylians move aside to let their leader pass. Rian walked out of the human circle and headed toward the reptiloid lord, hands still thrust high in the air, grinning that mocking, insolent grin that Blorg hated above all things in this life.

Not this time, you sweat-stinking, hairy ape, he thought, feeling acid waves of hatred break on the shores of his consciousness. *This time we'll play by my rules*!

The Devastator raised the rifle to his shoulder and squinted into the gunsight, lining-up the burly, red-bearded man in the turquoise jump-suit in its cross-hairs. He took a deep breath and then began to exhale gently, steadying himself as he did. The star-pirate was now about fifty yards away from him.

Haaa-aa-aaass-s-s-s! The cross-hairs of the gunsight intersected at the center of Rian's barrel-chest.

Still approaching at a steady pace, the buccaneer started to speak. "Now hold on a minute, Blorg. You've got . . . "

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! Blorg depressed the firing-button, and kept his finger jammed against it. The rifle flared in the dusk as its vivid beams shot forth. Rian's body jerked with the impact of the first shot, and was thrown backward as the succeeding blasts found their mark. By the time it hit the ground, there was little resemblance to the man who had been standing upright a moment before.

Kill them all! Blorg roared telepathically, in a frenzy of bloodlust, as he lined up the growling felinoid in his cross-hairs. To a man, the Death Legion commandos levelled their weapons on the stunned humanoids. Blorg fired. The commandos fired. Milling and screaming, the Taylians fell to the ground before the furious barrage, landing in charred and smoking heaps.

Hit the ship—demolish it! Blorg ordered, lowering his rifle. The troops behind him parted as three squat homies rolled up. As the covers on top of their housings began to raise, Blorg could see the cache of minimissiles inside; and as the robots bent over in the direction of the starship, he heard their internal computers clack as they processed the input of the robots' sensors and calculated the firing range.

Phwoom! Phwoom! Phwoom! Trailing jets of flame behind them, the missiles shot up into the air, dipping down a moment later into the arc that would put them in contact with the target. For an instant the area fell silent, and all that could be heard was the whistling descent of the missiles.

WOOM! BOOM! BAROOM! The ground shook to the explosions and the area lit up as bright as mid-day. When the smoke had cleared, all that remained of the Hazard was the blackened skeleton of its keel and ribs. Blorg hummed the great death-anthem of Sserp.

Just as he turned back to his troops—*Whaang*!—a

laser-bolt lanced out from the wall of foliage off to his left! The commando beside him dropped to the ground in smoke and flames. Blorg and the other commandos went into a crouch and aimed their rifles. The answering fire they sent into the rain forest burnt away a twenty foot swath in the green wall.

Blorg rose and grabbed the nearest scanner-tech, jerking him roughly to his feet. *How many left?* he demanded.

The animaloid gulped and fiddled with the dials on the face of his scanner. "I read two, Lord Blorg."

Blorg thrust the tech forward with one of his free hands, and waved the troops on with the other. *After them!* he ordered.

Her breastplate still smoking from the near miss, Zeif the Valsing tore off her flaming cloak and plunged into the underbrush. Not far behind, she could hear Blorg and his commandos enter the rain forest. Her hands went to her sides as she checked her weapons. The rifle had been melted and the zappers were discharged, but she still had her double-bladed axe.

"There's one over there!" the scanner-tech yelled, looking up from his screen and pointing ahead to the left. No sooner had he said that than a laser-beam dropped him in his tracks. Blorg and the others fired back. They were answered by a man's screaming voice.

One to go! Blorg telepathed as he set off again, the four scouts ahead of him clearing a path in the jungle with their de-vitalizer beams.

Suddenly the scouts disappeared before his eyes! The onrushing reptiloid reached out frantically and managed to grab hold of an overhanging creeper, stopping himself just short of the gaping pit that yawned before him. As Blorg looked down, he realized that it was freshly-dug, and must have been camouflaged before

the hapless scouts blundered into it. Now it lay open to sight, revealing the bodies of the thrashing, screaming commandos as they lay in the pit, covered from head to toe by scores of poisonous snakes.

Those filthy little natives again! Blorg thought angrily, as he watched the scouts die. A rustling sound in the underbrush made him look up and turn to his right. *Whi-i-iish!* Gleaming as it sped toward him, a silver axe loomed up before Blorg's eyes. He tried to turn away and duck, but—*Clong!*—the axe slammed into his plumed helmet.

Haaa-a-a-aa . . . Blorg felt himself drowning in a sea of roaring blackness. He exerted all his will in an attempt to steady himself, but his knees had turned to jelly. With a gasp, he pitched forward and plummeted head-first down into the pit.

"*The blood-debt is paid, Ordlar!*" Zeif Ysss-killer shouted exultantly to the skies of Azitlin. It was the last thing she said before the commandos gunned her down.

10 / Bringing It All Back Home

At the same time that Zeif the Valsing knocked Blorg the Devastator into the snake-pit, another bright ship soared into the skies of Azitlin. The Death Legion commandos, all gathered around the spot where their leader had fallen, barely had time to turn and look in the direction of the roaring sound before the craft shot out from its camouflaged position at the edge of the clearing opposite the great central pyramid. Across the huge area of hard-packed earth, the technicians on board the Scourge never even had time to get a fix on the starship before it scrambled and disappeared.

The fugitive vessel was none other than the good ship Hazard—the *real* Hazard, on its way back to Yahwoo. The High Master of the Fellowship of Light stood in the sick-bay's intensive care section and gazed down at the form of the young man in the bio-respirator. Nila, Purpur and Ween Leever stood by Garthane's side. A moment later, Red Rian—the *real* Red Rian—walked into the room.

"Has the kid still got a chance?" he asked Doctor Vana.

The doctor nodded. Purpur sighed with relief. Nila wiped her eyes. Ween sniffed loudly. "I think so," Doctor Vana replied. "We'll be back on Yahwoo in no

time. Then, once Dann gets checked out there, we'll have to get him the best care available."

"I know just where to send him," Garthane said.

Rian turned away from the respirator. "Garthane, you mean to tell me those things back there were actually our doubles?" The High Master nodded. "And that the other Hazard was exact in every detail?" Garthane nodded a second time. "Well then, how did you ever figure out what Ylang was up to?"

"Dann's thoughts reached me after you had crash-landed," Garthane answered. "At first, I thought it was a dream. But I kept returning to the memory of it until I began to understand. That was the night before the invasion of Havanal was launched. And the whole episode concerning the space-virus and the total erasure of all the Hazard's—the other Hazard's—recording devices just seemed too neat . . . and too strange. I didn't know what the doubles were about to do, but I was prepared for anything. So when they scrambled, and were about to kill me, I overpowered their minds and took the ship to X-8. Then I waited until the Valsings took off, and . . . "

The squawk of the intercom interrupted him. The com-spec relayed the transmission he'd just received: the League had lost the Battle of Havanal. Everyone on the Hazard was shocked into silecne at the news. It was several moments before anyone spoke.

"Garthane, that force-field's gonna give our side a lot of trouble," Ween said.

A solemn look came over the High Master's face. "I know. And according to the information I got from the minds of the clones, Ylang-Ylang is mass-producing them."

"That's a problem, I can tell you," Rian said, shaking his head.

"It is," Garthane replied. "Unless we do something about it."

Rian spoke to Garthane again, but his eyes never left Ween Leever's face. "There's something else you don't know, Garthane. Blorg has spies in Taylos." He produced the golden tracer-disc. "That's how old snake-skull happened to be laying for us outside of Yahwoo."

"Rian, that's a Greeban tracer!" Ween blurted.

"I know, Ween," the star-pirate replied softly.

"But the only Greebans on Yahwoo are Uncle Vax and . . . Ween's voice trailed off as a horrified expression spread over his face.

"I know, Ween," the star-pirate repeated.

Small slithery thoughts . . . startled, curious and dim: that was the first thing that crossed Blorg's mind when he regained consciousness at the bottom of the pit.

When his vision cleared, the lord of the Ysss saw the commandos leaning over, gaping down in slack-jawed astonishment at the fact that he was still alive. And indeed Blorg *was* a strange sight as he lay there in the pit, with hundreds of poisonous snakes of all different sizes and colors covering the length of his body like a bright and lethal blanket.

But where the serpents had blanketed the unfortunate scouts with their fanged and venomed anger, they lay as light as pleasant dreams on the reptiloid from Sserp, slithering over him and snuggling up to him gently, recognizing the Devastator as one of their own. Hissing and writing coyly, the nest of vipers welcomed Blorg like a long-lost brother and undulated in the cold comfort of his thoughts.

For a brief moment, the reptiloid was transported in memory back to the desertworld of his birth, as he

recalled the slithery play of his nursery days. He crooned telepathically to the snakes, singing them the death-rhymes his brood-mother sang to him when he was a newly-hatched snakelet. Then, brushing the serpents aside gently, the Devastator got to his feet and looked up at the flabbergasted commandos.

Get me out of here, you gawking idiots!" his mind roared, causing the snakes to scatter in every direction.

As Garthane issued precise instructions to the felinoid medical orderlies who met the Hazard at Mee's spaceport, Red Rian dashed off in search of Vax Waxnax Leever, a zapper in his hand and murder in his heart.

"*No, Rian, no!*" Ween cried, lunging after him. Quick as a cat, Purpur reached out and grabbed him by the shoulders. The boy struggled, but was unable to break the cat-man's powerful grip. Purpur spun him around and looked at him. There were tears in Ween's eyes. "Uncle Vax would never do a thing like that—never! I've got to stop Rian!" Purpur just stared at Ween, and shook his head slowly. "But, Purr," Ween protested, struggling to break free, "he'll kill him!" Purpur nodded.

Blam! The door to Vax's apartment burst open with a loud noise, startling the great-bellied old man who was eating his lunch at a table across the room, causing him to dip his bread-filled fist up to the wrist in the bowl of soup that sat before him. The star-pirate burst in and levelled his zapper at Ween's uncle, his face as dark as a thundercloud. Vax went wide-eyed, and slowly rose from his seat as the furious buccaneer stormed up to him.

"Why, Captain Rian," Vax said in a quavery drawl, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"Recognize this, unk?" the pirate asked, holding the golden disc under Vax's bulbous nose. His hand trembled as he held the zapper agains the man's ponderous belly. Red Rian could barely contain his anger.

Vax darted a quick look at the tracer. His eyes met Rian's for an instant. Then they travelled down to the zapper. "Yas," he replied with a gulp. "It's one of ours. So . . . ?"

"So that's how Blorg blew me out of the void!" Rian roared, the veins at his temples pounding, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. "Don't play games with me, you big bag of star-gas, not when I'm about to sizzle your guts like sausages in a pan!"

"There seems to be a slight misunderstanding here," Vax replied weakly, his knees beginning to sag.

"*Aaa-aa-a-aaah*!" the star-pirate roared, his rage mastering him as he stepped back and aimed his zapper at the heart of the old man whose great stomach gurgled with the borborygmus of fear. "That's it, you bamboozling bag of kag-skrit!" he bellowed. "I don't know whether you Greebans pray or not, but you've got just thirty seconds to do whatever it is you guys do before you die!"

Vax's knees gave way, and he sank back into his chair with a *whooshing* exhalation. "Sir, I'm innocent," he protested feebly. "Why, when I got away from Greeb, I . . . "

"I know how you got away from Greeb—with Blorg's blessing!" the star-pirate interrupted. His trigger-finger glided onto the firing-button of the zapper. "Say your prayers, buster!"

"That's not entirely correct, Captain Rian," a voice behind the buccaneer said coldly. Rian wheeled around and saw Ven Fenben, Vax's second-in-command, standing in the doorway, flanked by two other

Greebans. Rian's glance dropped from their narrowed eyes down to the gaping mouths of the zappers they held at their sides.

"Drop it, or you're dead," Ven told him. "*Now*!" one of the other Greebans ordered when Rian hesitated. The star-pirate dropped his zapper and raised his hands above his head.

"Ven, my boy!" Vax exclaimed, struggling to his feet. "You've come to save me! Dear Ven Fenben Grennel!"

"Shut up, you fat old fool!" Ven snarled, as one of the other Greebans aimed his weapon at Vax's trembling belly. "And sit down!"

Rian's jaw dropped as he heard this exchange. "What's going on here?" he asked.

Ven looked at him and smiled sadistically. "You may be a great star-pilot, Rian, but as a detective you stink."

"I beg your pardon, Ven," Vax piped-up nervously. "But . . . "

"I told you to shut up!" Ven snarled again, his eyes never leaving Red Rian's. "You see, Rian, that old tub actually did hoodwink the Ysss and escape from occupied Greeb." He smiled his nasty smile again. "But he didn't know that he took three of Blorg's men with him. By the way, I'll take my tracer now." he said, holding out his hand. "You don't realize it, Rian, but you're talking to the next governor of Taylos. I'm willing to give you ten to one that's what Blorg will make me when I present him with your skull."

"Ven Fenben!" old Vax howled, puffing as he heaved himself out of his seat. "You're a traitor to your own people, a filthy, stinking traitor!"

The smile never left Ven's lips as he said, "Kill him." The two Greebans with him moved forward and aimed their zappers at Vax. As Rian began to lower his hands,

Ven stepped back and aimed his zapper at the pirate's head, his finger tensing on the firing-button.

"*None of you will ever kill again*" The Greebans all wheeled around and saw a tall, purpled-cowled figure in the doorway.

"You're unarmed, Garthane," Ven sneered. "How do you propose to stop us?"

Garthane stared into Ven's eyes, his own pupils dilating as he did so. Suddenly, the Greeban began to tremble from head to toe and broke out into a violent fit of coughing. Rian looked around, and saw that the same thing was happening to the other gunmen. He could feel the waves of energy emanating from the High Master's mind.

Kaa-haaa-phwaah! Ven exploded into a great, barking cough. As he did, a jet of blood shot out from his mouth. Blood flowed from his nose like water from twin faucets. Blood welled-up in the canals of his ears, and overflowed onto his jaws and neck. Ven fell to the carpet, dead as any man had ever been. Hemorrhaging in the same fashion, the two gunmen fell down, as dead as their chief.

Just then, Ween burst into the room and ran over to his uncle, embracing the big-bellied old rascal as best he could. "Uncle Vax!" he sobbed. "Uncle Vax!"

"There, there, m'boy," Vax said, hugging his nephew and patting him on the head. "It's all right, Ween Nerdeen. It's all right."

"I knew you didn't betray us," Ween said between sobs. "I knew you could never do such a thing."

"Yas. That's true. I may have my faults," Vax drawled, security restoring his former pomposity, "but I love my world. And my family," he added, belly-hugging his nephew.

"Oh, Zel!" Rian exclaimed in a weak voice, as he

came up to the pair. He looked stricken. "Vax, Ween," he said. "I . . . "

Stepping back from his uncle's embrace, Ween spun around and launched a hay-maker at the pirate's face.

Crack! The punch landed right on the point of the star-pirate's jaw, and sent him reeling backwards to the door. Purpur entered just in time to catch him. Garthane went over to Ween and put a calming hand on the boy's shoulder. "He couldn't have known, Ween. Besides, Vax is all right, so forgive him."

Ween glared at Rian. "I'll never forgive him," he snapped. "Never!"

"Let this be a great lesson to you, Captain Rian," Garthane said. "Always get the facts straight before you act."

Rian was pale as the moon of Aquaea. "I almost killed an innocent man," he mumbled. "Vax, can you ever forgive me?"

"I forgive you, Captain Rian," Vax Waxnax Leever said magnanimously, throwing his arm around the star-pirate's shoulder and leading him out of the room. "I do forgive you. How were you to know Ven was behind it all, when even I—his leader—didn't. Come, let's go to your quarters and drink to it."

Nila passed them in the hallm just before she came into the room. "Garthane," she said berathlessly, "the members of the Fellowship—the ones who stayed on Palos—have just touched down at the spaceport. And the Havanal expeditionary force is in orbit outside the atmosphere."

"Good," Garthane replied, smiling serenely as he nodded. He looked up from Ven's corpse and turned to the others. "Nila, I want you to stay with Dann until the hospital-ship comes for him. After you see him off, remain here on Yahwoo and direct the League's liaison

functions with Primula." Nila nodded and left the room.

Garthane smiled up at the cat-man. "Purpur, let Rian and Vax have a drink or two before you break it up. That will give you a little time to say goodbye to Maowl. Then bring the captain back to the Hazard." Purpur meowed.

"Ween," Garthane said, smiling tenderly at the Hazard's chief tech-head, "I want you to come with me. Let's have a little talk before we leave."

Ween nodded. "What's up, Master Garthane?" he asked. "Where are we giong?"

The High Master stared into Ween's eyes. "We're going on a little visit . . . "

Blowing Rian and the Hazard away, followed by the slithery mingle with the pit full of snakes, had done wonders for Blorg's disposition. Even when the commandos told him of the unidentified starship's escape, he dismissed it with a wave of his hand. Later, perhaps, when Taylos had been retaken, he would come back to this place and irradiate it.

His headache was even disappearing. The gashed helmet was an embarassment, of course, but he would change it in a moment, when he got inside the Scourge. *What was that thing who hit me, and what did it hit me with?* he asked the Ysss officer who marched beside him.

It was a Valsing female, my lord. And it hit you with a double-bladed durallium axe.

A female, eh? He raised his upper right hand and fingered the long gash in his helmet. *Hits hard for a female. Was she annihilated?*

Scorched to cinders, the Ysss replied. Blorg smiled as he went up the Scourge's flexiladder.

"Sir, I've just picked up a transmission," the humanoid com-spec told him as he entered the ship. "We trashed them at Havanal. But we lost Admiral Venaam."

No great loss, Blorg thought privately. He hissed with laughter as he imagined his rival's last expression before Death made him welcome. *The only force-field console to fail, and old Venaam had to get it. What a pity.*

Has the emperor given the order for the starfleets to assemble? he asked the man. The com-spec nodded.

Good. Then all is in order. Blorg sighed like a tea kettle coming off the boil. *We have done enough for one day. Let us return to the comforts of Flaigon.*

He turned to the insectoid equerry who had entered the ship behind him. *Clean and polish those skulls, and then bring them to my cabin.*

"Damn all machines!" Ordlar the Valsing growled, as he left the engine room of his starship in the company of the chief-engineer. "Can you keep the blasted thing together until we reach Flaigon?" he asked.

The engineer tugged at his beard. "Yes, I think so," he said slowly. "We'll get there later than you planned . . . but we'll get there, all right."

Ordlar ran his finger over the blade of the axe that hung by his side. He thought of Zeif . . . and snake-pits . . . and that scaly beast, Blorg.

"As long as the reactors hold," Ordlar said, squinting at the stocky engineer.

"They'll hold, Ordlar Hondingsson. They're operating below standard, but they'll hold."

"They'd better, Hylar. We've got a lot of killing to do." The engineer nodded in agreement, smiling like an ice-wolf in a cattle pen.

"It's a hell of a way to travel," Ordlar grumbled as he walked off, "on one's last voyage."

It took three stiff shots of nenegol to steady the skipper of the Hazard's trembling hands. Rian fingered his aching jaw and thought of Ween Leever, a crushing sadness in his heart as he did.

Then he thought about Dann Oryzon. He prayed the Infinite that the kid would come out of his coma with all his faculties intact. Even though the young Aquacan was his rival in love, the pirate had taken him into his heart with no reservations.

And he thought about Nila. The lady from Aurea Solis had come to a decision, but she wouldn't make it known until Dann had recovered. And Red Rian didn't have a clue as to which one of them she was going to choose.

A huge, dark form appeared in his thoughts. Rian had hated to miss the chance to ice Blorg on Azitlin, but Garthane deemed it more important to get Dann away from the place . . . and he was right. But the star pirate knew he'd meet Blorg again.

Then he thought of Ween, and hung his head in shame. "Vax," he said, addressing the old guzzler across the table, "Ween's gonna hate me for the rest of his life . . . "

Quaarg sat at the controls of the Malice in a state of shock. His visit to the strange galaxy had been one of constant surprises. The behavior of the creatures who ruled the place filled the young reptiloid with wonder.

It was disconcerting enough when he considered the way they treated him, a Ysss, a member of the fiercest and most dreadful race in all creation. But what manner of creatures were they, those self-assured and arrogant

entities who felt not the slightest twinge of awe when the Dark Emperor's name was mentioned? He shook his head in disbelief.

Well, Quaarg thought, as his ship raced through the eerie realms of hyperspace, *at least great Ylang will be pleased that they have responded positively to its request*.

He didn't understand what was going on, but he knew instinctively that it was important . . .

The medical ship trembled with the jolt of hyperspace entry, but Dann Oryzon wasn't even aware of the transition. His respirator floated three feet off the deck, suspended in air by four levitator beams. White-smocked attendants flocked around the machine, monitoring the complex of instruments on its panels, taking notes each time a variation occurred in the read-outs.

Also in attendance were three brain specialists, two from Yahwoo and one from the League's med-staff based at its Taylian headquarters there. They conferred in hushed voices, nodding occasionally when one of their number would begin to elaborate on one of the finer points in the medical discussion. They were considering the need for brain-surgery, but had not yet arrived at a decision . . .

In her apartment in Mee, Nila lay sprawled across her bed, crying her heart out. The brave lady from the golden planet was frightened for Dann Oryzon's sake. She didn't know if he was going to make it out of his coma, and whether or not his faculties would be intact, even if he did.

What had really frightened Nila was Doctor Vana's mentioning the possibility of Dann's having incurred

brain damage, the possibility of recovery with impaired function, the possibility of Dann's becoming a vegetable.

Nila cried harder than she had since she was a little girl.

Suddenly, a light touch on the back of her head caused her to turn around and look up. Through her tears, she saw Maowl standing over her.

The felinoid yowled softly as she stroked her friend's hair, sharing her grief.

There was a firm set to Garthane's jaw as he sat in the control-center of the Hazard; his normally serene countenance wore a look of fierce determination that his son's companions had never seen before.

All around the starship, bright vessels streaked through the energic dimensions of hyperspace as the survivors of the Havanal expedition—and an even greater force as well—sped on their way to a grim encounter.

Rian wheeled around in the pilot's seat and faced the High Master. He was burning with curiosity, and his ears were almost as red as the hair that surrounded them. "Garthane," he said, staring hard into the man's eyes, "you've massed most of the available fighting ships of two galaxies and assembled all but ten of the remaining old-time members of the Fellowship of Light . . . what's going on?"

"I was about to announce my plan to the entire spacenavy in a few minutes, Captain. Do you mind waiting?" The star-pirate lowered his head and ground his teeth in frustration. Purpur patted his skipper on the back as the ghost of a smile haunted Garthane's lips. Ween just sat with his head down, wringing his hands.

Rian sighed loudly, melodramatically. "Yeah, sure,"

he said. "I can wait."

"No, I'll tell you now," the High Master replied. "I'm not a man who feeds on the agonies of others."

"All right!" Red Rian exclaimed, his grin flashing like a beacon in the void. "Where're we goin' then?"

Garthane's expression grew solemn as he looked around the control center. "We're going to Flaigon," he said gravely, as the others went wide-eyed and gaped at him. Even Ween looked up and his expression matched those on the faces of his friends. "To destroy the planet . . . and Ylang-Ylang along with it."

Ylang-Ylang gurgled and sputtered in its lair, lighting up the place with an obscene display of pyrotechnics as it gloated over the success of its latest move in the great galactic game.

Perfect! Perfect! the Dark Emperor rhapsodized, the acid waves of its joy singeing the nerve-ends of every creature in Kordor, the Mordling clones included. *The Battle of Havanal was a great victory just as I had predicted. And even now, a space-force ten times greater than the armada is assembling, drawn from all points in my vast empire. Once they have rendezvoused in deep space, my darlings will then speed on to Primula–to the outworlds of the Nova Vega system, where they will descend on the planet Palos . . . and obliterate the Fellowship of Light.*

The Forbidden City rocked to the Dark Emperor's mirth. *Soon my starships will all be outfitted with force-field consoles, and my fleets will then be invincible. Nothing in the universe will be able to withstand me, and I shall be at liberty to devour every living thing in it, gorging myself unto the end of eternity!*

And dear little Quaarg must be on his way back now, returning with his beloved father's guarantee of safety

"Looks like this is it," Red Rian said, as the spacenavy flared in the void as it left the currents of hyperspace. Purpur growled softly beside him. Garthane's eyes rolled up in his head as he entered the cosmic trance-state of communion with the Infinite. "We'll be approaching Flaigon's security network in a few minutes," the star-pirate informed his companions. He winced as he turned to face Ween Leever. "Kid, I'm sorry as hell for what happened on Yahwoo," he said haltingly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Ween stopped wringing his hands abruptly, although he did not look up for several moments. When he did, he was blushing . . . and smiling as well. "I already have, skipper," he said. "I already have."

The cat-man purred louder than the Hazard's reactors as a relieved and smiling Red Rian turned back to the console and threw open the intercom-mike's key. "Attention all hands," he barked. "Look sharp, you bow-legged bunch of overfed ginks! We're going in to take care of that bloated pile of radioactive debris once and for all. So shake your butts and limber up your trigger-fingers. . . . And the odds are high that we'll find old bonehead somewhere in the vicinity, too. C'mon now, lads, let's give it all we've got, so we can send them all to the hot racks of hell!"

Just as the Valsing ship touched down on the surface of Flaigon, the collective powers of mind of the Fellowship of Light tossed the huge black starships that ringed the planet's atmosphere like small craft on the crest of a tidal wave, cracking the keels of the outermost vessels and scattering the others in every direction, sending them streaking off to all points of the compass. All

points except one . . . the one that indicated the approach of the attack-force's bright ships.

By the time the air-lock decompressed, and the hatch of Ordlar's starship *whooshed* open, the bombardment of Flaigon had already begun. The great docking facility was rocked by explosions, and ground-crews and platoons of black-uniformed soldiers scattered and ran for their lives, as the allied space-fleets rained showers of missiles and torpedos down on the black planet's surface.

Armed to to the teeth, whooping like the devil's cheerleaders, the Valsings burst out of the starship, fingers on the triggers of their weapons, expecting a hot hail of laser-beams for their welcome. They stopped dead in their tracks when they found the immense spaceport nearly deserted, the last remnants of the force that guarded it scurrying off for the shelter of the city below.

Ordlar surveyed the scene with grim satisfaction. "Someone had the same idea that we did, but only on a larger scale," he said, waving his men on. "To the levitators," he roared. "Let us find Ylang-Ylang, and hunt the beast down!"

When the Scourge came out of hyperspace, Blorg looked up at the vidscreen in his cabin and could not believe his eyes. The dark orb of Flaigon was ringed by thousands of bright starships, each and every one of them firing great, flaming fusillades down at its surface—and the Atmospheric Security forces were nowhere in sight!

It was unbelievable! The lord of the Ysss hissed his surprise as he stared at the incredible spectacle on the screen. The League of Free Worlds only a short time after its defeat in Havanal was attacking the very heart

of the Dark Empire!

Blorg burst out of his cabin and dashed down the corridor that led to the Scourge's control-center, shaking his head in an attempt to dispel the black fog that had settled on his mind.

Startled out of its dreams of gluttonous anticipation, the Great Devourer flashed and boomed as the onset of the League's massive bombardment shook the Forbidden City of Kordor. Walls buckled and ceilings cracked; the very stones beneath Ylang-Ylang's pulsating mass began to buck and heave.

What is going on here? the emperor asked, too astonished to be furious at the interruption. Something had the planet in its grip and was shaking down the walls of Kordor. Ylang felt the first energizing flush of anger as it realized that Atmospheric Security was not responding to its impatient queries. Pandemonium reigned outside the brazen doors of the lair, and the Devourer could taste the fear and confusion of its underlings. The horrible shrieks of the Mordlings rang out in the distance, growing louder with each repetition. Whatever was shuddering the walls of the Forbidden City had freed the monsters as well.

Ylang sent its thoughts up to the surface of Flaigon, and then beyond it, up into the air and out into space. The star-tyrant burbled and gasped as it realized what was happening. *The League of Free Worlds is attacking my court,* the Devourer thought, a thrill of dread rippling its great mass, causing it to fill the lair with dark, sulphurous clouds. Then Ylang grew afraid, as it thought of the Fellowship of Light. *The one thing I feared has come to pass. The old monkeys are after me!*

Ylang-Ylang screamed, explosions detonating all over its surface, as it felt the first stab of the powers of

mind of the Fellowship of Light . . .

Commander Ozain's voice blared over the speakers of the Hazard: "*All ships are to keep firing! Pour it on! Concentrate your firepower on the assigned sectors. Hit them with everything you've got!*"

Red Rian watched the vidscreens in awe as the great silver flotilla rained its fire on Flaigon's surface like the signature on the order for Armageddon. Multi-megaton explosions flared on the planet's surface, their coronas lighting the dead face of Ylang's homeworld with the brilliance of borning suns; huge mushroom clouds spouted high into the thin atmosphere, mantling the radiance below in churning billows of thermal turbulence.

"Make 'em all count, lads!" the star-pirate roared into the intercom-mike. "Each and every one of 'em! Lets give that guzzling bag of unholy energies a meal to remember!"

Beside him, Purpur yowled with excitement; behind him, Ween kept saying "Wow!" over and over again, each time Flaigon shook in its orbit with the violence of the barrage. Rian smiled as he recalled the time when, dead-drunk, he had painted each of the torpedos' warheads with the Dark Emperor's name. *There's nothing like a personalized message to get your point across*, he thought gleefully.

Rian turned to look at Garthane. He could feel the power emanating from the man. The High Master's face was drained of all color, and his features were set in an expression as hard and unyielding as the side of a mountain.

Pour out all your energies, and direct them at Ylang, Rian heard the High Master order telepathically. *Pierce its center–tear it apart!*

"Calling the Hazard! Calling the Hazard!" a voice squawked over the communicator. "Attention Captain Rian. The Scourge has just been sighted. It's shielded by a force-field, and is coming in at a heading of one-three-fiver—repeat: one-three-fiver. Blorg's here, and he's coming in fast!"

Garthane shook his head as he came out of the trance. He turned to Red Rian, who was staring at him expectantly.

"He's covered by that force-field gizmo," the pirate said.

The High Master nodded. "Then we will have to neutralize it. Turn your ship around, and go out after him."

Rian grinned at him. "I've been waiting a long time for this," he said.

11 / A World Destroyed

Ylang's mind-rending screams of pain flooded Kordon as the Valsing—a hundred-and-fifty strong—streamed into the network of corridors that led to its lair. The troops garrisoned in the Forbidden City were almost totally immobilized, and the blood-lusting intruders mowed down any black-uniformed bands that happened to cross their path. Between the frequent earthquakes and avalanches of falling basalt, and the dreadful, howling demons that ran amok in Kordor, destroying every living thing they got their claws or jaws on, the soldiers of the emperor's household guard had all they could do to save their own skins.

As the Valsings entered the far end of the antechamber, they ran smack into a pack of the ferocious Mordlings. Screaming like a chorus auditioning for the Last Judgement, the forty-foot horrors tore into Ordlar's band. Bodies flew through the air and blood spattered the walls, beasts roared and men cursed, lasers flared and whined as the terrible battle was joined.

"Kill the hell-hounds! Blow their heads off!" Ordlar roared, urging his men on as he fired his laser-rifle straight up into the gaping, dagger-toothed mouth that descended on him, dripping its green and venomous saliva. The giants were awesome in their power and fury, but they were no match for the concentrated

firepower of the Valsings.

When the last of the Mordling clones had crashed to the gound in a great, smoking heap, Ordlar looked around the antechamber and realized he'd lost over a third of his force. But that meant nothing to him once he spotted the brazen doors that led to Ylang-Ylang's lair. He waved the men with the mini-missile launchers forward, and then signalled for his crew to check out their weapons in the interval that elapsed before the things were set up. And when all was in readiness, Ordlar thought of Zeif and smiled a smile as cold as an arctic sunrise. He raised his hand in the air, looking around at his crew for what he knew would be the last time. The chief engineer winked and they all answered with the wolf-smiles of the Valsings.

"Fire!" Ordlar roared, bringing his hand down sharply. The antechamber rocked with explosions, and flared with a brightness foreign to the dark stones. The great doors blew in and fell to the floor of the lair with a resounding crash. Before the smoke had even begun to clear, the Valsings streamed in, whooping their war-cry.

"*Wella-la-lai-yaaa!*" they bellowed as they charged over the fallen doors, blasting away with laser-rifles and zappers at the startled group of Ysss clustered in the center of the lair. Surprised and stunned, the reptiloids made an attempt to return their fire, but were cut down before they had time to go into a crouch. When the last of the Ysss had fallen, the Valsings turned and looked upon Ylang-Ylang for the first time.

Yaaa-aa-aa-aaah! the Dark Emperor screamed, the concentrated powers of mind of the Fellowship of Light creating a huge and painful turbulence at its center. Stricken by the sight of Ylang's corrupt energies thundering and lightening in an accurate reflection of its

torment, the Valsings clutched at their blinded eyes and reeled backwards, screaming the screams of the damned.

"Oh, no!" Ordlar wailed, unable to comprehend the vision of horror he'd just seen. "Oh, no!"

YAAA-AA-AA-AAAH-H-H-H! As the Great Devourer screamed even louder, a burst of insane energy exploded out of the front of its mass and enveloped the Valsings. When the sulphurous clouds had lifted, there was not a single trace left of the intruders.

Suddenly, Ylang's mass began to contract as the walls of the lair started to collapse. The Dark Emperor called for the Ysss to come in him immediately . . .

"The readings are unbelievable, sir!" the tech exclaimed, looking up from the screens with an incredulous expression on his pale face. "The planet can't take much more of this. It's going to blow wide open any second."

The Supreme Commander of the League of Free Worlds nodded and smiled a grim little smile. He reached out and activated the communicator-mike.

"Attention all ships," he said. "This is Commander Ozain speaking. Keep pouring it on. Don't let up for a moment. I want you all to keep firing until that filthy rock is blown into nothingness.

Eager hands carried the bio-respirator out of the starship and placed it in the waiting vehicle. As the ambulance sped off, the two figures that sat on each side of Dann Oryzon looked up at each other, their eyes glowing in their beautiful countenances.

"Is everything ready at the center?" the female asked.

The male nodded his head slowly. "It should be. I

told them to be ready to operate the moment we arrive."

"I hope it's not too late," the female said, as she stared down at the unconscious young man in the respirator.

"Pray the Infinite it isn't," the male replied gently. "Pray that we can save him . . . "

Haaa-aa-aaass! Blorg the Devastator looked at the vidscreen and almost fell out of his seat as the shock of recognition jolted him with an overdose of adrenalin. There on the screen, streaking directly toward his ship with the swiftness and certainty of divine retribution, was the good ship Hazard!

No! he thought, as confusion reasserted its dark presence in the shadowy caves of his reptilian mind. *No, no, no—it can't be! It has to be the duplicate Hazard! I just incinerated Rian and his . . .*

"Greetings to the filthiest and most misbegotten monstrosity ever spawned in the entire universe, that vilest of insults to the life-force, that grazzy, overgrown half-acre of space garbage that goes by the name of Blorg the Devastator," a bright baritone voice rang out over the Scourge's com-speakers. "Greetings to that clammy, slinking slayer of wee children and the infirm elderly, that hissing mass of corruption that hides its ugly face under a visor and its scabby bone-head beneath a helmet. Greetings from the skipper and crew of the good ship Hazard to . . . "

Click! Blorg switched off the speaker, and hissed furiously. He sat there trembling like a patient undergoing electroshock. It *was* Rian! There was no mistaking that voice and form of address. *Womp-bomp-a-bomp*! His four fists thundered down onto the panel of the console. *I killed the doubles*! he thought, seething with

rage. *I risked my life on that stinking wasteworld—only to blow away those stupid clones*!

He turned away from the screen and screamed a mute scream of insane anger and sheer frustration as he looked out at the bow of his starship and saw the glow of his force-field fade into nothingness.

Blorg spun around to face the Ysss at the controls of the force-field console. *What the hell do you think you're doing, you brainless mental deficient? Reactivate that field before I tear your heart out with my own hands!*

The technician's only reply was a gurgling hiss that sounded like the last stages of air-lock decompression. Suddenly, he pitched sidewise in his seat and fell to the deck.

Keep her on course! Blorg ordered the co-pilot, as he sprang up and bounded over to the force-field console, stepping on the dead technician in his haste.

Frozen! The controls are frozen! he exclaimed, scrabbling frantically at the dials and levers on the face of the console. *Damn the suns, damn the stars! What is happening here?*

He raced back to the control-console and threw open the intercom switch. *Attention all hands. Stand by to blast that ship out of the void! Gunners, make your report.*

Nothing. Silence. The only response the lord of the Ysss received was the blast of white noise that came back over the open com-speaker.

Make your report, I said! the Devastator bellowed mentally. But still no response was to be heard. Then suddenly Blorg was slammed back into his seat as the Scourge began to decelerate.

Accelerate, you scum—accelerate! he screamed at the co-pilot beside him. *Now*! He lashed out with his

lower right arm and slammed the Ysss on the side of his plumed helment. *Blong*! The Ysss rocked in his seat, pitched forward onto the console, and slid to the deck.

Blorg leaned over and fumbled with the controls, jamming his fingers down on the keyboard as he attempted to re-program the ship's computer. *Haaa-aaaass*! Nothing happened. The controls were frozen. He looked up, and saw the Hazard draw alongside of the Scourge. Magneto-beams lanced out from the starboard side of the bright ship and locked onto the hull of the dark vessel. The Hazard had grappled the Scourge, and was drawing closer as the beam-lengths contracted.

The lord of the Ysss sat bolt-upright in his seat, transfixed by the spectacle outside, as he realized that the Scourge was now under the control of Garthane's powers of mind . . .

"There she blows, sir! That's it—the end of Flaigon . . . and Ylang-Ylang!"

In the control-center of the Aurea Solis, Commander Ozain gave the order to cease firing and settled back in his seat to witness the beginning of the end of the black planet.

The surface of Ylang's homeworld was now so bright, consumed as it was by a holocaust of thermal energies, that the crew had to turn away from the portholes and watch the rest of the incredible spectacle on the vidscreens. A hush fell over the ship and all hands stared at the screens with rapt and fascinated attention, watching the heart of the Dark Empire go up like kindling wood in the fires of vengeance and technology.

Not a single soul in the great spaceforce that ringed the planet with its silver ships uttered a word. No one made a sound.

"*Damn your scaly ass*," Red Rian roared as the air-lock hatched *whooshed* open and he burst into the control-center of the Scourge, "*I have you now!*"

The Devastator's only reply was a hot fusillade of laserbeams from the brace of zappers he held in his upper hands. Blorg was now at the far end of the room, his back to the corridor that led to the after-decks of the huge black vessel.

A split-second before the laser-beams *whaanged* through the air and scorched the plating on both sides of the hatch, Rian dove behind the control-console. He rolled over twice and came up at its far end, blazing away at Blorg with his own two zappers.

As the wave of searing energy broke to one side of him, the Devastator turned in the opposite direction and raced down the Scourge's central corridor.

Rian's next burst of fire blew the hatch-frame to smithereens milliseconds after Blorg had departed through it. Just as the star-pirate was drawing a bead on the black form that zig-zagged down the corridor at breakneck speed, Purpur, Ween, and a number of the Taylian crew streamed into the control-center.

"Hold it right there!" Rian bawled, freezing them all in their tracks. "Nobody but me sets a foot out of this place. He's mine. I'm going after old bonehead alone. We're gonna settle this thing man to . . . monster."

Purpur, Ween, and the others opened their mouths to protest; but before they could, the skipper of the Hazard bolted out of the control-center and tore down the corridor after Blorg.

The cat-man started after him, but Ween and three of the crew held him back. "Let him go, Purr," Ween said. "He's got an old score to settle. Remember, Garthane told us he'd put the crew of this ship out of

action."

"Who'd have believed it?" old Klegg rasped, his voice thick with awe. "Rian's got Blorg trapped in his own ship, while Ylang-Ylang is about to blow like an over-stoked reactor!

The image shuddered violently, smearing its photons all over the face of the vidscreen, vibrating with an intensity that tore at the optic nerve. A second later, the screen flared with an incredible brightness that whited-out the image and left the viewer cursing and holding his hands to his eyes.

Every ship in the flotilla that swung in orbit outside Flaigon's atmosphere bucked and heaved suddenly, pitching its occupants to the decks as the shock waves arising from the black planet's destruction travelled out into space in all directions.

Riven by the League's bombardment of incalculable megatonnage and the terrific surge of energies unleashed by the Fellowship of Light, and black planet burst asunder, exploding from its very core, sending a billion whistling fragments streaming out into the blackness of the void. The dying world's last roar was louder than a chorus of a million dinosaurs screaming in unison as they experienced their last painful moments of life in the prehistory of a thousand worlds. The fragments of Flaigon zoomed like missiles past the star-ships, a great number of them bouncing off the spacenavy's defense-screens as well, as they went whistling into eternity. Columns of smoke and mushroom clouds were transformed into pennants of fire as they streamed into space, their intense heat funneled into the cooling blackness that surrounded the stars.

"Sir, I got one last reading on the scanners before the turbulence knocked the instruments out of kilter," the

tech informed Ozain after the cyclonic wave of energy had passed and the star-ship settled back into its former course. "One small group of starships appears to have gotten off in time and made it out, and one of them was a real big baby."

Commander Ozain shrugged his shoulders in response to this news. "That's no big deal," he said. "What's a couple of star-ships, more or less, compared to the fact that we've just blown the thing that ran the Dark Empire to the other side of eternity?"

He turned to the com-spec. "Try to contact the Hazard," he ordered. "I'm anxious to know how Red Rian's doing."

Whaang! Buwoom! Whaang! Phwaa! Blazing away at each other like maniacs, blowing away housings and partitions, fusing metal and scorching bulkheads, Rian and Blorg played their deadly game of hide-and-seek throughout all the levels of the Scourge. And all around them, wherever they went—on the bridge or the quarter-deck, in gun-compartments or torpedo rooms, at the bow or the stern—the Death Legion crew sat slumped in their seats or sprawled on the decks . . . all dead.

Haaass! As the laser-beams whined their death song and flashed directly overhead, sending the three blood-red plumes on his helmet up in crackling flames, Blorg the Devastator shot through a hatch and thundered onto the cat-walk of the huge vessel's engine room. Forty feet below him, the massive reactors hummed like sleeping beats and lit up the place like the basement of hell with the flickering glow that emanated from behind their shielding. Beams and bulkheads shuddered to the great alternations of energy that coursed from the reactors and pulsed with a dull thunder as regular as the beat

of some titan's great, hammering heart.

Halfway along the cat-walk, Blorg spun around and went into a crouch, aiming his zappers at the hatchway as he waited for his archenemy to enter the engine room. Rian came in a moment later—but not in the fashion the lord of the Ysss had anticipated. He dove through the hatchway and somersaulted onto the cat-walk, throwing himself to one side as soon as he got back on his feet. Had he come through the hatchway standing upright, Blorg's tremendous laser-fusillade would have cut him in half.

His hand still on the firing-button of his weapon, the Devastator sent a hail of red rays after the star-pirate, leaving a trail of smoke and running metal to cover the tracks of his foe. As the deadly beams sprayed his way, Rian ducked and rolled over twice, came up on his stomach, braced himself with his elbows and tossed off a withering volley of answering fire. Blorg threw himself to one side millisecs before Rian's beams cut through the railing behind him. He screamed telepathically as droplets of molten metal burned through his boot and seared his flesh to the bone. Dense clouds of acrid smoke covered the area and obscured Rian from sight. Blorg mashed his fingers against the firing-buttons of his zappers and strafed the spot where his enemy should have been.

But Red Rian was no longer there. Hurling himself against the opposite side of the cat-walk, he swung over its railing and hung out in space, over the flaring reactors below, hooking an arm around the lowest metal bar and firing back through the smoke for all he was worth.

"Fire and brimstone—hell and damnation!" the star-pirate swore in a strangled voice, as his index fingers beat out a frantic tattoo on the firing-buttons of his weapons. *The zappers were burnt-out!* He'd fired them

so often during the chase that they had discharged.

He scarcely had time to chuck them away and drop down over the outside of the cat-walk, when the Devastator sprayed a stream of screaming fire back at him. Rian gripped the metal grillwork at the edge of the cat-walk and dangled in the air as the beams lanced overhead, splattering as they sawed through the railing above him. Metal spluttered and hissed as it sailed past him in fiery gobbets. Rian screamed in anguish as a molten nugget dropped down the back of his jump-suit, searing his flesh as it went. Freeing one hand, he managed to beat out the flames that blazed in the fabric at the small of his back.

Whaang! Whaang! Whaang! Blorg's next volley nearly blew the buccaneer off the cat-walk. But Rian was able to reach out to the grillwork with his free hand and yank himself sharply to one side, the muscles in his arm popping with the strain of supporting the drag of his free-swinging body.

Just then the smoke began to clear, and Blorg was able to locate Rian once more. He jammed his fingers against the firing-buttons of his zappers, and started to direct his fire downward, the laser-bolts descending in twin verticals of fiery devastation.

Haaass! Suddenly the weapons flared off, their whine cut short with a strangulated scream. *Tap-tap, Tap-tap*. The Devastator's fingers drummed against the firing-buttons, tapping-out a hollow code of impatience and frustration. Without further delay, Blorg tossed the discharged zappers aside and rushed at the man who hung from the cat-walk.

With a strength born of desperation, Red Rian lunged into the air and grasped the central pole of the guard-rail, heaving himself up with all the force he could muster. He planted his feet on the outside of the walk-

way, and was almost in a standing position as Blorg approached him. The muscles in his arms cracked as he strained to pull himself erect; his face was beet-red, and sweat streamed down his face in rivulets.

Death make you welcome! Blorg's mind cried out, as he jammed his boot into the star-pirate's chest. *Wump*! Rian wheezed with pain as the jack-boot slammed against his pectorals. *Die, Rian—die!* Blorg screamed over and over, in an animal rage, as he bashed his black boot against the pirate's chest again and again.

Huuh! Uurgh! Blackness seeped into his field of vision and welled-up before his eyes, as Rian clung desperately to the guardrail, staring up at his own agonized reflection in the one-way visor of the hissing giant in black who stomped his foot against his aching chest with all the power at his command.

Wump! Wump! Rian coughed explosively, spraying flecks of blood over the gleaming visor, as the Devastator's boot thundered against his chest with the impact of a trip-hammer. Blorg's mind screamed at him in paroxysms of inarticulate and blood-lusting fury. *Wump! Wump!* And still the pirate clung to the rail, battered almost beyond belief as the lord of the Ysss continued to stomp away, totally possessed by the demon of death.

Red Rian's mind bobbed on the tossing waves of blackness that threatened to overwhelm his consciousness as he groped desperately for a way to escape from the hammering kicks and save his life. Finally, through the blood and the thickening black haze, it came to him . . . the only thing he could possibly do.

As Blorg's boot shot between the poles of the railing once more, Rian heaved himself to one side and released his grip on the metal bar. But just before he began to plummet down to the hard surface of the deck forty

feet below, he wrapped his right arm around the Devastator's leg and grabbed onto the top of his boot with his left hand. Then he tensed his body, and dropped down past the cat-walk.

Waaa-aa-aaah! Blorg screamed horribly and wrapped his four arms around the railing, as his leg snapped with the impact of Rian's full weight. His bones cracked with a sound that echoed throughout the engine room, and he nearly fainted from the shock. Struggling against the cataract of pain that flooded his mind and broke over the walls of his consciousness, Blorg saw Rian heave himself up to the bottom of the cat-walk and roll back onto its grillworked surface. The Devastator marshalled all his strength and thrust himself backwards, falling to the cat-walk with a clang of body-armor.

Neither of the adversaries moved for several moments, so overpowering was their pain and fatigue. Finally, Rian rolled over and struggled to his hands and knees, grunting and sobbing with the effort that this simple action required. Blorg shook his head, emitted a series of high-pitched hisses, dragged himself to the railing, and attempted to pull himself to his feet. When he got up, his broken leg gave way beneath him, and it was all he could do to brace his back against the rail and hold himself up.

As soon as Rian was on his feet again, he launched himself at the Devastator in a bone-cracking body-block. *Thump*! Blorg's other leg gave way; he whipped his four arms around the railing to prevent himself from falling, and hung there in a cruciform position. *Blong*! Rian leaned forward and spun around on one foot, raising his other high in the air and using it to deliver a smashing keedo kick to the side of his enemy's head.

The force of the kick sent Blorg's head straight back, and thrust him upright against the guard-rail. *Blong*!

Before the Devastator could sag again, the buccaneer followed-up with another kick to the head this one even harder than the first. Blorg's four arms left the rail and flailed the air convulsively, as his great frame teetered at the edge of the cat walk. His breath whistled out in a gurgling hiss, and his head hung limply to one side, borne down by the weight of the scorched helmet that covered it.

"*Now, you faceless, bone-headed, filthy bag of kag-skrit*," Rian roared, as he kicked off from the far side of the cat-walk and hurtled toward Blorg with all the strength left in his body, *hiss your way into the bowels of hell*! He shot across the intervening space like a hot rocket, aiming himself at the Devastator's chest.

Wump! Rian smacked into Blorg at high-speed, the resounding thump of his impact followed by the sharp, snapping sound of reptiloid bones cracking. As he bounced off the Devastator's breatplate, the star-pirate saw Blorg's torso jerk sidewise at an impossible angle, indicating to him that the lord of the Ysss had a broken spine. An instant later, all four arms clawing at the empty air, the black-armored giant pitched backwards and disappeared from sight with a whistling hiss.

AAA-A-A-A-A-AAAH! Blorg's telepathic scream diminished in volume as his body hurtled to the deck of the engine room. *KERBLONK*! A thunderous clatter of body-armor greeted the skipper of the Hazard's ears as he tottered over to the guard-rail. He took a deep breath, and looked over. And there below him, forty feet down on the deck, the lord of the Ysss lay flat on his back, thrashing and flailing like a crippled black crab.

Rian hauled himself over the railing and stood on the outside of the cat-walk, staring down at his fallen enemy. Then, he moved three steps to his left, lining himself up with the body below. After hesitating a single

moment to squint down and calculate the distance between himself and Blorg, he jumped off the cat-walk — straight down at the Devastator!

WUMP! Feet first, Rian landed four-square on the center of Blorg's chest! He catapulted off the body and rolled over on the deck, lying on his back for several moments before he was able to rise again. Only the pulsing of the Scourge's huge reactors could be heard; and the room was bathed in their bright, flickering light as the star-pirate dragged himself to his feet and staggered over to the side of the lord of the Ysss.

Blood ran down the sides of the one-way visor, and gushed from beneath the bottom of the dented black helmet. As Rian reached down to his belt and unsheathed a long, gleaming knife, Blorg raised one hand in feeble protest, hissing a strangulated hiss that gurgled up through the blood in his mouth.

Through the blood-spattered screen of his visor, Blorg saw the pirate towering above him, death's signature in his eyes. The blade of the thin, sharp knife reflected the red glare of the reactors as Rian slowly raised it in the air. Blorg's twenty fingers twitched spasmodically, but the rest of his great form was still. Suddenly, the star-pirate shook his head and sheathed the knife. Through the dark haze that began to obscure his vision, Blorg saw that Rian, beneath those eyes as cold as the grave, was grinning his insolent grin.

"Cutting your guts out would be too easy, Blorg," the star-pirate said, in a soft, even voice "You haven't got much longer to live. This way, you'll have something to think about before you slide down the long, hot chute to perdition. Think about this: about Urgel, the world you irradiated . . . and my wife and children . . . and all the other billions you wiped out on that dark day.

"And finally, think about me, your old pal, Red Rian

. . . the man who paid for your ticket to hell." The pirate straightened up, clicked his heels together, and—grinning wickedly all the while—tossed off a smart salute at his dying enemy. After that, he leaned over and pried off the Devastator's helmet. Rian winced as he saw the bony, reptilian face, covered with blood and wide-eyed with pain. It was the first time he'd ever seen Blorg's features. The Ysss do not allow themselves to be looked upon by any of the lesser races, as they call all other higher life-forms; only in death are their faces ever seen.

"You're even uglier than I thought," Rian muttered as he straightened up. He tucked Blorg's helmet under his arm and patted it. "I think I'll just keep this tin pot," the buccaneer said, "as a remembrance of our friendship." He grinned wickedly at the lord of the Ysss once more, and winked at him. "Have a nice trip, Blorg," he said quietly. Then the skipper of the Hazard turned on his heel, went up the cat-walk ladder, and left the engine room without so much as a backward glance.

The crew of the Hazard broke out into wild cheering as their skipper limped back into the Scourge's control-center. "He'll never bother anyone again," Red Rian said grimly, when things had quieted down. "Not in this life." He smiled. "I sent him regards from Urgel, and gave him a few things to think about before he conks out." The crew cheered again, even louder than before.

"Skipper," old Klegg said, after the din had subsided, "shall we back-up the reactors, and blow this tub to smithereens?"

The star-pirate shook his head. "No. Let it be. Let it drift in space . . . as Blorg's mausoleum. I want them all to see what happened to him. C'mon, let's get out of here!"

Quaarg gasped as he realized what the enemy had done. Flaigon had been blown into nothingness—into infinitesimal particles that would drift aimlessly in the void for the rest of eternity.

Suddenly, his attention was diverted as he saw the images of several starships on the vidscreen. *There*! he informed the being at his side. *Those ships—we've got to pick them up!*

The incomprehensible entity nodded and spoke in a voice that chilled him to the marrow of his bones. "Yes, we will do that . . . and send those bright ships on their way."

Quaarg looked from the great spaceforce gathered in the distance to the eerie creature in the seat beside him. *But they greatly outnumber your fleet!* he exclaimed. *How will you do such a thing?*

"You shall see," came the reply . . .

Garthane watched the Hazard's screens as a wave of League ships detached themselves from the main force and streaked out to intercept the unidentified spacefleet that had just arrived on the scene. And a moment later, he gaped with astonishment as waves of energy rose up from the dark heart of the Infinite and dashed those ships to pieces.

Order your starships to pull back, Commander Ozain, he telepathed, as Rian, Purpur and Ween gaped beside him. *I don't know who or what those creatures are, but they appear to have powers of mind at least the equal of the Fellowship's.*

"I don't believe it," Red Rian said in a thick voice, "I don't believe it."

My people are exhausted from the attack on Flaigon, the High Master continued. *We're in no shape to con-*

tend with these intruders now. Call your ships back, Ozain. Sound the retreat.

You are mighty indeed, my lord, Quaarg telepathed, bowing low to the strange being who stood before him. *Great above all mortals.*

Pick up the survivors in the dark ships, the being thought, smiling at the reptiloid's homage as he entered into contact with his fellows in the starfleet behind the Malice. *The first priority is the huge vessel at their head.*

My lord, Quaarg told him as he came out of his bow, *that is the Scourge up ahead, and it contains the emperor's favorite. It appears to be stalled. I request your permission to investigate.*

"As you wish," the being replied . . .

At the same time that the League's force streaked into hyperspace, the enormous space-armada that raced toward Primula received the news of the destruction of Flaigon and the Dark Emperor's death.

By the serpent's tooth! the leader of the great force exclaimed in the control-center of his flagship. *They have destroyed immortal Ylang itself! Once the news of this catastrophe spreads throughout the empire, all the captive worlds will be up in arms!*

The Ysss overlords who were gathered around him all shook their heads in agreement and hissed their concern. The unthinkable had happened. The Dark Empire had just been shaken to its very foundation. And the future was up for grabs.

Give the order to turn these ships around, the High Admiral told his subordinates. *The invasion of Primula will not take place. We're going back at once . . .*

12/ Awakenings and Prophecies

In the engine room of the Scourge, Quaarg squatted on his haunches and gazed at the broken body of Blorg the Devastator. *May Death welcome the great Blorg*, he intoned mentally, rocking back and forth on his heels. *All the people of the serpent in all the realms of the Dark Empire will mourn his passing.*

Blorg gurgled weakly in response to the young reptiloid's sarcasm. *Let me tell you the news before you go forth on the dark journey, my lord*, Quaarg continued blithely. *Flaigon exists no more, but Ylang-Ylang lives. Moments before the black planet was destroyed, the emperor funneled its energies into a Mordling starship and launched itself into space through a passage cut out of the living rock, carved ages ago for just such a purpose. The beings from the unconquered galaxy have rescued the Devourer and scattered the forces of the League and the Fellowship like chaff in the wind. They are about to return home; there they will harbor the emperor until the affairs of state have been stabilized.*

Blorg's hisses were barely audible now, and his eyes began to glaze as the life-force ebbed out of his body. *The emperor sent word for me to bring you to him, Lord Blorg. I have no idea why.* Quaarg shook his head slowly. *Unless it is to witness your last agonies and*

savor the moment of your death. He looked up as the footsteps of the med-techs sounded on the cat-walk above.

Before I leave you, My lord, Quaarg told Blorg mockingly, *I have one last piece of news from the realm of the living. Ylang-Ylang has already chosen your successor*, he lied. *In a few moments, there will be a new steward of the Dark Empire, a new lord of all the Ysss. Would you like to know who that shall be?* he asked archingly, making the most of this last bit of information.

sss-s-s-sss . . . Blorg's only reply was a faint whisper of a hiss.

He stands before you now, Blorg, filling your vision as you die. His name is Quaarg.

Blorg reached out feebly with his upper right hand, in an attempt to grasp Quaarg by the throat, but ended up clawing only the air between them. A moment later, his arm dropped back to the deck and his entire body wracked by a series of convulsions.

Goodbye forever, Blorg the Devastator, were Quaarg's last thoughts as he left the engine room of the Scourge . . .

When the good ship Hazard touched down at Libera, captial city of Aurea Solis, it met with a reception unequalled in the long history of the Primula galaxy. And the celebration that followed lasted, day and night, for a full week. The only thing capable of ending the festivities, it seemed, was Garthane's sobering address to the allies, simulcast to all the inhabited worlds of Primula and Taylos.

The High Master spoke from the great hall in Libera, where the high command of the league had assembled to hear him. The speaker's platform was flooded with light

as Garthane approached it, and an Army of broadcast technicians clustered around the dais, completing their preparations for the speech. When he reached the platform, Garthane raised his arms and cut short the thunderous applause.

"Brothers and sisters of the Primula and Taylos galaxies," he began, in a loud and authoritative voice, his penetrating grey eyes staring directly into the vidcams, "all things are one. Infinity is at the heart of all things."

Nila and Red Rian sat up in their seats when they noticed the severe expression on the High Master's face. Ween Leever gulped, and Purpur leaned forward in his seat, cat's-ears cocked in the direction of the dais.

"It is not over yet," the leader of the Fellowship of Light told the billions who watched him in both galaxies. "Granted that Flaigon no longer exists, and the Blorg the Devastator was broken at the hand of Red Rian of Urgel; granted that rebellion is rising throughout the Dark Empire, and that the imperial forces are panicked beyond imagining . . . but the hardest battle is still to come."

The great hall was now as silent as a graveyard in the deep of night. "We have been monitoring imperial communications, and have received disquieting news. Ylang-Ylang lives." Groans of disbelief and cries of wonder went up throughout the hall. Garthane held his hands up for silence once again.

"The Dark Emperor was rescued by the strange and unknown beings our invasion force encountered after the bombardment of Flaigon. Whatever these creatures may be, they are immensely powerful, and appear to be the possessors of powers of mind that might well be greater than those of the Fellowship of Light. In my opinion, they are incredibly dangerous . . . and they

seem to be allied to the Dark Emperor." As Garthane paused, every soul in the place held his breath.

"We must take these mysterious intruders into account in all our future plans," he went on. "And we must also do our utmost to support and encourage rebellion throughout the Dark Empire. I do not wish to discourage you," the High Master said gently, "but the worst is yet to come. So keep faith with the forces of life, and grow stronger as you prepare to strike another blow for the freedom of the star-seas."

He smiled serenely at his vast audience. "We shall win . . . we must win. May the Infinite bless you all."

As Garthane left the dais to the cheers and applause that signalled the League's renewed determination to oppose the Dark Emperor and all his works of evil, Red Rian leaned over and whispered in Nila's ear, nuzzling the nape of her neck as he did. "Well, babe," he said, "at least we don't have to worry about old bonehead any more."

Nila turned to the star-pirate and patted him on his bearded cheek. "My father would be glad to hear that," she whispered back, leaning toward him and putting her lips to his ear. "And Dann will be too, when he gets back."

Then she smiled, and whispered in Red Rian's ear once more. "And if you don't stop smooching me in public," she said, still smiling, "I'm going to haul off and punch you right in the nose."

Rian's reply was inaudible, due to the volume of the cheers in the great hall, but the expression of surprise on his face could be made out for several hundred yards.

Dreams and whispering voices, soft, concerned murmurs and the touch of gentle hands, blazing lights

and the impersonal hum of surgical equipment, flashes of pain and the explosive feed-back of tormented nerve-ends, rushing winds and muted roars, shudders and jolts, the rustling of bedsheets and the crisp, clean smell of fresh linen . . .

These were the principal components of the timeless, drifting montage of impressions that Dann Oryzon brought back to waking reality as he regained consciousness for the first time in more than three weeks. They grey dream had dissipated like mornings fog on the heart of the Western Sea, and the sweet, clear light of day greeted him with all the tenderness a mother displays upon the return of a long-lost son.

He fluttered his eyes rapidly, and then squinted, narrowing his eyelids to mere slits as he attempted to resolve the blurred shapes before him into sharp-focus. When he finally did, he saw Altektu and D-Anacom standing at the foot of his bed, their eyes glowing like diamonds in the green perma-flesh setting of their beautiful faces.

"Al . . . D-Ana," he croaked, with the voice of someone who had not spoken for a long time, "where am I?"

"At Astyx," D-Ana replied softly.

"What happened . . . to me?" He struggled to sit up. "Garthane . . . Nila . . . Rian ... "

The soft machines came to the side of the bed, and gently settled him back on his pillows. "They are all right," Altektu told him. "Everyone's all right. When you're feeling a little stronger, we'll tell you the whole story."

Dann closed his eyes and took a deep breath before speaking again. "I remember . . . something," he said haltingly, as he struggled to salvage a cluster of impressions from the broad ocean of delirium out of which

he had just emerged. "Soft hands . . . soft, murmuring voice . . . fragrance of flowers . . . someone calling to me . . .

The android couple smiled down at him, nodding their heads as they did.

"Who else . . . was here?" Dann asked.

D-Ana stroked his hair. He felt her cool fingers brush his forehead.

"She'll be here in a moment," Altektu replied.

It was the first time in aeons that Ylang-Ylang had been anybody's guest, and the Devourer rumbled and flickered darkly in its discomfort. Outside the great structure that had been specially constructed to house the pulsating field of corrupt energies that was the Dark Emperor, Quaarg the Destroyer paced up and down nervously in a state of high anxiety, awaiting the results of Ylang-Ylang's interview with the masters of the strange and dreadful place that was its temporary residence.

Inside the vast, gloomy chamber, the Devourer's powerful hosts stood before it in a huge arc and stared full into the center of its vile and intense energies with uncovered eyes. And those white, fearsome eyes had neither iris nor pupil, but merely presented a solid field of milky white as their possessors gazed unharmed at Ylang's searing and infernal brilliance.

"Why should we intervene to save the great toy you call your empire?" the leader of these entities asked, stepping forward from the center of the arc and boldly addressing the immortal thing that had once been a Mordling. "You have nothing we want . . . nor need."

There you are mistaken, the Devourer boomed, the music of its thoughts orchestrating into a dark, sweeping symphony of power and seduction. *I have one thing*

to offer you, my lords . . . the one thing in all the universe that you can never acquire by your own powers, formidable as they are.

"And what might that one thing be, Ylang-Ylang?"

The Lord of Life and Death banked its energies low, throwing the vast space into murk and shadows as it did, compressing its mass into a cloud of luminous blackness as dark as the heart of midnight or the secrets of the grave.

The power to defy time, Ylang purred, sending out a stream of vaporous black tendrils to lap at the feet of its hosts. *The power to gaze out over the seas of eternity and catch sight of the far shores of infinity . . . The gift of immortality!*

The Devourer's hosts exchanged startled looks and whispered among themselves. When they fell silent, their leader addressed the star-tyrant again. "You have offered us the one thing we do not possess. The offer interests us. We shall withdraw to discuss this matter more fully, and then we will return and give you our answer."

Yes-s-sss, yes-s-sss, do that, my gracious lords, the Devourer replied, hissing like the great serpent that guards the Tree of Life. *Discuss-s-sss it. Think about it . . .*

Quaarg sprang to his feet as the lords of the strange place filed out of the great chamber. They ignored his presence when they passed and, since he was beneath their notice, spoke freely among themselves as they departed.

"But if we choose to become immortal," Quaarg overheard one of them say with a note of revulsion in his voice, "must we be transformed into a thing such as that?"

"I think not," their leader replied, still within earshot

of the repitloid. "Should we decide to accept Ylang's offer, I shall see to it that we introduce a few modifications of our own into the process."

Haaass! Quaarg shuddered when he came out of his bow, and hissed with awe. Strange and dreadful things would soon come to pass; he was convinced of that. And in a short span of time, he was sure that he would witness the birth of a new generation of gods.

In its guest-room, its makeshift lair, the Great Devourer rumbled and thundered with dark contentment as it dove into the lightless sea of ecstasy. *I have them*, Ylang gloated. *I have these high and mighty Lords fast on the hook of desire and overweening ambition. I have offered them the one thing they want above all other things. I have made them the offer they cannot refuse...*

The chamber was almost totally dark as the Devourer plumbed the depths of its foul *extasis*. Ylang was content. The great insult would soon be avenged in a tidal wave of blood and fire. The League of Free Worlds would be obliterated from living memory . . . and the audacious manniken, Garthane, along with the rest of those purple-cowled little lumps of excrement, would be punished with an attendant horror and torment that would shake the living universe to its heart.

Ylang-Ylang burbled fearfully as it sank deeper into the devouring mouth of its self-created oblivion. *Let them discuss*, it thought contentedly. *Let them ponder. I am safe and secure in this place; and I have the time and patience to wait. After all, what is time to the immortal?*

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